

PLAYING BETWEEN THE LINES:
AN EXAMINATION OF NEGRO LEAGUE BASEBALL
IN OKLAHOMA,
1892 TO 1965

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Abstract: When Oklahoma settlers staked their claims after the land rush in the late nineteenth century, they also brought along the sport of baseball. The game of innings rapidly became an integral part of recreation throughout the red dirt and oil producing plains and hills. Despite Oklahoma becoming the last American “melting pot” for diverse cultures, the forty-sixth state also quickly established segregation when legislators’ first order of business instituted Jim Crow. Baseball served as a buffer for black athletes to navigate the social hierarchy and to display their athleticism, often in segregated ballparks. The sport also inspired African-American fans when they witnessed their hometown nine triumph over other black or white teams in front of mixed-race crowds. Achievements on the ballfield boosted a Negro Leaguer’s ability to “play between the lines” and occasionally transcend prejudice and overcome adversity. Although Oklahoma African-American ballclubs never joined the “black majors,” Negro National or American Leagues, they exhibited professionalism in organized regional leagues and demonstrated proficiency on the diamond throughout the years of widespread segregation.

Using Tulsa as a case study, this work examines the role of black baseball in many Oklahoma cities and towns and in nearby states where “Okies” played. Teams across the state, particularly in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, regularly nurtured and matured young talent for the Negro major leagues and became a place for aging black big leaguers to extend their careers. Ballclub owners also regularly recruited talented athletes throughout the region and across the country. Several organizers, promoters, and owners showed great business acumen for assembling competitive teams and for negotiating the tricky and racially-divided environment to provide ballpark venues and fields for play.

Technology now enables researchers with tools to further explore black baseball history. Modern instruments like Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) can aid historians, preservationists, and geographers in non-destructive ways to probe sites where Oklahoma Negro Leaguers played in Tulsa and beyond. Exposing the past by utilizing burgeoning technology augments the understanding of baseball’s vital role in African-American communities during segregation, and how it provided them with a sense of place.

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PREFACE

“You will not see it in the record books, but there’s two kinds of history. There’s the kind that’s written down, and then there’s the kind that really happens.”¹

—Jean Shepherd, *Jean Shepherd’s America*

The genesis of this project birthed out of a missed opportunity. Back in 2011, the Tulsa Drillers AA baseball club honored former Negro League players and their families in a pregame ceremony during the Juneteenth weekend celebration. To commemorate the history of Tulsa black baseball, the Drillers donned throwback T-Town Clowns jerseys, a well-known local team from the 1940s and 1950s.² Only days after the on-field exhibition wowed fans in attendance, I learned that “my” hometown team had acknowledged the segregated era and included those participants into the Tulsa Drillers

¹. Jean Shepherd, "Jean Shepherd's America - Chicago," (episode in *Jean*

². Tulsa Drillers, 2011. "Drillers Home For Eight Big Games, June 16-23: First 6 Games to Close Out First Half," Minor League Baseball, http://www.milb.com/news/article.jsp?ymd=20110614&content_id=20465140&fext=.jsp&vkey=news_t260&sid=t260; Tulsa Drillers, 2011. "Sardinha's Walk-Off Blast Keeps Drillers Playoff Hopes Alive: Homer Gives Tulsa 6-5 Win In 13 Innings," Minor League Baseball, http://www.milb.com/news/article.jsp?ymd=20110618&content_id=20668824&fext=.jsp&vkey=news_t260&sid=t260.

family. Frustrated, I felt I had unknowingly wasted a momentous occasion to peer through the knothole of Negro League history and pay homage to a few men and their families who endured and thrived outside the fences of white baseball.

Losing the chance to witness that special event provoked me to inquire further about Oklahoma's colored baseball leagues. During a trip to Kansas City, Missouri to visit the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum (NLBM) in 2013, I queried to see if they housed sources related to Oklahoma-based teams or players. As I finished my tour and perused souvenirs in the gift shop, I requested to speak to a director or any knowledgeable staff member who might be able to aid my research. There I met director Dr. Raymond Doswell.

Dr. Doswell informed me that unfortunately the NLBM archives contain little material regarding organizations outside of what the institution defines as professional African-American baseball.³ Because the museum primarily covers the history of the

³ Donn Rogosin, *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues*, 1st ed. (New York, New York: Atheneum, 1983); Center for Negro League Baseball Research, "Defining Negro League Baseball", Center for Negro League Baseball Research <http://www.cnlbr.org/DefiningNegroLeagueBaseball/tabid/54/Default.aspx> (accessed September 30 2013). Note: As a whole, Negro League history tends to cover topics related to black baseball at the national stage, largely focusing on teams or players that were part of the Negro National (NNL) or Negro American Leagues (NAL). American Studies professor Donn Rogosin defines "Negro Leagues" as "big-league black teams of segregated America," but he ignores regional contributions like Oklahoma's black baseball past. Dr. Layton Revel, director of the Center for Negro League Baseball Research, differs in his description as to what classifies as "Negro League." Revel states, "We believe it is important to recognize everyone's contribution to the history of black baseball in America." He contends that Negro major league teams, barnstorming teams, independent or industrial teams, black military teams, and black college teams all have equal value in understanding the importance of black issues and baseball in national history. This project sides with Revel's definition as it includes Oklahoma black baseball

black major leagues, only relevant documents and artifacts about those ballclubs make it into the collection. Doswell further explained that no Oklahoma teams meet their criteria for inclusion into the Kansas City halls. The news that the NLBM lacked sources that I sought disappointed me, but my inner bloodhound sought more answers.

Although I have dedicated much of my academic career to learning and writing about baseball and its complex past race relations, standing inside the gift shop among replica jerseys and tourist trinkets, it became evident to me that a vacancy in Oklahoma black baseball history needed to be filled. Many residents in African-American communities easily recall teams, players, and ballparks from the area; however, missing from Oklahoma and Negro League chronicles are the contributions of the numerous organizations and individuals who cultivated their baseball talents in the state. Doswell inspired me to take action by “pounding the pavement” once I returned home because he recognized the significance in documenting what most historians generally consider “regional history.” He noted that more than ever there is the need to archive those people and events outside the canon of the NLBM. Without Doswell’s encouraging nudge, this project might have stalled.

Upon returning home, I began searching archives and seeking out people who knew about African-American baseball in Oklahoma prior to integration. Within a week,

under the umbrella of “Negro Leagues.” However, the value of Rogosin’s *Invisible Men* cannot be understated. *Invisible Men* successfully illustrates the trials and travails of players in the NNL and NAL. To avoid any future confusion, please note that throughout the text the difference in use of “African American” versus “African-American.” A hyphen is used throughout the text for adjective purposes unless cited by another author; for people, the hyphen is absent from the text.

I located the last living original member of the Tulsa T-Town Clowns baseball club. Early on, sources also revealed that the majority of teams joined organized leagues and produced several star players. From statehood to integration, Oklahoma continually nurtured and matured handfuls of pros like Wilbur “Bullet” Joe Rogan, Walter Lee “Newt” Joseph, Wilson “Frog” Redus, Henry “Flick” Williams, Sylvester “Hooks” Foreman, Elwood “Bingo” DeMoss, “Big Bertha” Louis Santop Loftin, Frazier “Slow” Robinson, and Hank Thompson.⁴ Many others became local celebrities and mentors. The history remains for those who choose to look. Nearly every town with a sizable African-American population assembled competitive baseball lineups. Those Oklahoma Negro League teams also stretched beyond the state’s borders, traveling as far south as Texas and Louisiana, as far north as Chicago, Illinois, and covering all of Arkansas, Missouri, and Kansas. Several Oklahoma teams earned a respected reputation around the region as men of professionalism that possessed a lineup that was hard to defeat.

Countless people and institutions have been very generous with information and materials to enhance this project. Their help has been invaluable. *Oklahoma Eagle* newsman Ed Goodwin introduced me to the original second baseman who played for the

⁴ Chris Jensen, *Baseball State by State: Major and Negro League Players, Ballparks, Museums and Historical Sites* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2012), 238-239; Phil Dixon and Patrick J. Hannigan, *The Negro Baseball Leagues: A Photographic History* (Mattituck, New York: Amereon Ltd., 1992). Note: The premise of this research is to illustrate the importance of black baseball in Oklahoma *before* players went professional. Bob Burke, Kenny Franks, and Royce Parr’s collective project *Glory Days of Summer: The History of Baseball in Oklahoma* and Phil Dixon’s *The Negro Baseball Leagues: A Photographic History* do a good job covering the men who went on to play in the Negro major leagues. Much like Tulsa’s and Oklahoma City’s dedicated minor league followings, the goal of this work is to represent men who contributed to Oklahoma history.

Tulsa T-Town Clowns, Mr. Sylvester Nichols. Nichols helped flesh-out Tulsa's rich, and virtually unknown, black baseball history. Richard Hendricks, director of the Oklahoma Sports Museum in Guthrie, shared all of his documents on Oklahoma Negro Leaguers. Hendricks showed me several photographs of the Guthrie Black Spiders, as well as pictures from Negro League reunions he organized throughout the first decade of the new millennium. Hendricks provided me with contact information for Mr. Porter Reed, a Negro Leaguer from Muskogee. Reed taught me about Muskogee baseball and about his playing days in the professional Negro Leagues for the Houston Eagles. Reed also connected me to Mr. Eugene Golden. Golden filled in gaps regarding the history of rural black baseball teams in Clearview, and he reminisced about his time with the professional Cleveland Buckeyes. Each former ballplayer happily imparted firsthand experiences, which personalizes the game, adds context, and makes it tangible. They all offered information that led to new findings.

Through persistent inquiries and networking, evidence continues to surface three years into this project. As it turns out, a missed chance transformed into an even greater opportunity. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought in 2011 that I would meet, interview, share dinners, and go to baseball games with a few of the same men who I missed seeing being honored at the Drillers game. As cliché as it is to say, this research has truly been a labor of love, yet I never tire reading about and documenting the stories of black baseball in Oklahoma. In fact, nearly every day I discover a new nugget of information, which continually reenergizes my zeal for the game and pushes me to see this project through to completion. Every discovery begets another discovery. My affinity and respect for those who played in the segregated era evolved into a call to

action: to document the existence of Oklahoma Negro League teams and players. This work is dedicated to them.

CHAPTER I

AN INTRODUCTION: OKLAHOMA, SEGREGATED BASEBALL, AND THE NEGRO LEAGUES

“[Oklahoma] is a crazy quilt of contradiction and controversies, travails and triumphs. It has been exploited and abused, cherished and fought over. It is a puzzling place. . . . Oklahoma seems to be a metaphor for the kind of hypocrisy found in . . . bastions of self-righteousness that thrive in born-again hamlets and cities of the South and Southwest.”⁵

—Michael Wallis, *Way Down Yonder in the Indian Nation: Writings from America's Heartland*

Life in Oklahoma during the twentieth century was nothing short of an anomaly—a day-to-day contradiction—especially by how it affected those in the minority. In the state's relatively short history, just over a century now, citizens of the 46th entry have confiscated sacred lands, harbored Robin Hood outlaws, wrangled cattle, strung up bandit cow thieves, chewed the fat with maverick politicians, endured lynchings and the Klan, and dodged angry tornados sweeping down the plains. As dust devils and twisters swept past the histories of pioneers digging out sod houses, Red Scare socialism, affluent

⁵: Michael Wallis, *Way Down Yonder in the Indian Nation: Writings from America's Heartland* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 2,4.

oil barons, and Native windtalkers, another history met the broom and the belly of a rug—not to be uncovered for generations. Now fifteen years into a new century, it seems that in many ways little has changed. In 2015, 108 years after statehood and 126 years since the first run of land-grabbing hopefuls staked their claims, race relations in Oklahoma has continually faced encumbered progress. The viral video featuring University of Oklahoma Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity members celebrating segregation and lynching will continue to pockmark the way the nation views our state's values.⁶ Several prideful Oklahomans flaunt their racial “superiority” in more covert ways by blaming “welfare” for those who they believe abuse social systems or by criticizing talking heads like Jessie Jackson or Al Sharpton. And yet some of the acrimonious few continue to openly, blatantly, and boastfully spew racial epithets behind closed doors, in garages, and even in public spaces.⁷

Race is still a divisive issue in Oklahoma. Cities largely remain racially separated, and much of the white populace dreads mention of the mars and scars carved into local histories. Currently, a countermovement opposes a more balanced methodology of historical research to include the voices of the non-elite. They criticize and dismiss the majority of “non-rich white men” history as minority fringe or “revisionist propaganda” that embellishes the past and thereby over sensationalizes

⁶ Dallas Franklin, "Video Appears to Show University of Oklahoma Fraternity Singing Racist Chant," ed. News Channel KFOR (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: News Channel KFOR, 2015); Tyler Kingkade, "Oklahoma Frat Boys Caught Singing 'There Will Never Be A N***** In SAE'," ed. Huffington Post (Huffington Post, 2015).

⁷ Note: This is a personal observation by the author. Many people harbor separatist views about those who are “other,” but when they gather with likeminded peers, unspoken opinions often find an audience.

isolated events.⁸ Others justify their disconnect by defensively saying, “Well, I didn’t own slaves or participate in the Race Riot, so why should I have to consider the thought of reparations or public apologies?” or “Why does everything have to be about race, aren’t we past that already?” The answers are less about opening old wounds to guilt-trip people for the actions of past individuals, but more about acknowledging past events regardless of how uncomfortable the subject matter. History must include race because race relations are what formed the path to present day. At the heart of Indian Removal, Post-Reconstruction migration, and modern-day conflicts over illegal immigration, race and ethnicity stand front and center.

Many historians often view issues of race through catastrophic events or monstrous acts of violence to illustrate the severity of relations between whites and blacks. In such a polarized world, it becomes harder to find a voice that actually knows when to listen. Contrary to current convention, looking at Oklahoma baseball through bronze-colored lenses provides a unique and subtle way to see and feel the complexities of race relations. Collectively, the numerous stories of Negro League teams sprinkled throughout the state from the 1890s to the early 1960s goes beyond sport, in many ways personifying the metaphor of what life was like prior to integration. Baseball was a

⁸ Ben Jones, "After a Hundred and Fifty Years, the North Fights On," *Confederate Veteran*, March/April 2015. Note: Read *Confederate Veteran* magazine to understand opposing views against a more balanced or altruistic approach to viewing the past. *Confederate Veteran* magazine’s Chief of Heritage Operations Ben Jones opines, “*Historical revisionism* (Jones emphasis) is not good thinking.” Jones laments, “The historical revisionist approaches ‘facts’ like an apple picker, throwing aside the apples that do not fit the politically driven narrative. . . . It is not honest, but political propaganda.” Jones and likeminded others believe modern documentary methods are “second rate” and have skewed the opposition’s version of “true” history.

democratic game in a dictatorial society. For black athletes, the sport stretched the constrictive boundaries of discrimination. In this hybridized meritocratic culture, peppered with minstrel antics, Negro Leaguers earned opportunities to perform in segregated ballparks to the delight of both black and white fans. Black teams annually battled their local white counterparts, usually for bragging rights, but occasionally for gate receipts or city titles. Not to dissuade the importance of volatile events in race history, included within the text there are grim episodes. However, more importantly, baseball history can flip the lever on the ballpark lights of the past and illuminate the state's dark era, thereby exposing people to various teams and players in black baseball outside of the professional Negro Leagues.

In Oklahoma's early days, just months after newcomer settlers and freedmen raced on bareback and saddled cow ponies or in family-filled covered wagons to establish new lives along the plains, the burgeoning new pastime made popular after the Civil War quickly became a valued form of recreation for the '89ers. Before there were sandlots, there was pasture ball. As early as July 30, 1889, in places like the territorial capital city Guthrie, green meadows in one-horse towns became the place of spectacle as many townspeople and nearby residents traveled to see a friendly game of base and ball in the hot summer heat on the Oklahoma prairie. Tent cities formed around the makeshift ball grounds, and hundreds of men, some sporting black umbrellas to shield the sun, watched on as players rivaled one another for a nine-inning song (See Appendix A.1).⁹

⁹ Oklahoma Sports Museum, "Ball Game Guthries V Oklahomas," (Guthrie, Oklahoma: 1889).

Although the first image of Oklahoma baseball appears to be a white-only game, many African-Americans settlers also played the sport in newly-established black towns around the state. The first known recorded instance of black baseball teams organizing in Oklahoma occurred on March 5, 1892.¹⁰ The *Langston City Herald* reported, "Capt. Andy Mackey says he will have the boys so well drilled that they can make any nine that tackles them play ball."¹¹ At the end of a hardworking week, baseball quickly became part of routine entertainment in the black town. Every Saturday, they "entertain[ed their] country cousins to the Queen's taste" with horse auctions, horse races, and baseball games.¹² Langston regularly met nearby Guthrie on the diamond.¹³ During a cornucopia of thrills and shrills, the Acmes of Guthrie tangled with the Excelsiors of Langston against a backdrop of cannon fire, music, and dancing.¹⁴ In a rather high scoring game, the Excelsiors soundly defeated the Acmes 17-9.¹⁵ Black baseball in the early 1890s teemed with excitement and activity.

¹⁰. "Local and Personal," *Langston City Herald*, March 5, 1892.

¹¹. Ibid.

¹². "Local," *Langston City Herald*, April 16, 1892.

¹³. "A Grand Celebration," *Langston City Herald*, August 13, 1892; "Our Man Around Town Hears:," *Langston City Herald*, August 13, 1892; "Our Man Around Town Hears: ," *Langston City Herald*, August 20, 1892; "Our Base Ball Boys Met," *Langston City Herald*, September 3, 1892.

¹⁴. "A Grand Celebration."

¹⁵. Ibid.

By 1907, when Oklahoma became the 46th state in the union, newly-elected legislators made Senate Bill One the very first order of business establishing Jim Crow which legalized segregation and outlawed interracial marriages.¹⁶ Even as the ink dried on the new law, many former slaves and sharecroppers continued the Post-Reconstruction trend to flee the South and other oppressive areas in search of this newest “Promised Land.”¹⁷ Over the next decade, agricultural black towns sprouted along with the cotton and corn to form flourishing agrarian villages with sizable populations stretching to the four corners of Oklahoma.¹⁸ African-American transplants certainly experienced fair shares of hardships, a byproduct of living off the land, but also from the segregation laws caused by familial prejudices that many lawmakers carried with them whence they came. During this time of the Great Migration, an era which saw millions of African Americans migrate to urban areas for employment opportunities—particularly in the north, historian Samuel Dester notes that by 1914, “the state was possessed of a sizable rural-African-

¹⁶ Larry O'dell, "Oklahoma Encyclopedia of History and Culture: Senate Bill One," Oklahoma Historical Society <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/S/SE017.html> (accessed March 30 2014); James M. Smallwood, "Oklahoma Encyclopedia of History and Culture: Segregation," Oklahoma Historical Society <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/S/SE006.html> (accessed March 30 2014); Samuel Dunn Dester, “How Southern Is Oklahoma? Segregation in Agricultural Extension, 1914-1965” (master’s thesis, Oklahoma State University, 2010), 10.

¹⁷ O'dell, "Oklahoma Encyclopedia of History and Culture: Senate Bill One,"; Eddie Faye Gates, *They Came Searching: How Blacks Sought the Promised Land in Tulsa* (Austin, Texas: Eakin Press, 1997), x, xi, 35.

¹⁸ Dester, "How Southern Is Oklahoma? Segregation in Agricultural Extension, 1914-1965".

American population that faced much of the same discriminatory treatment as their Southern counterparts.”¹⁹ By the mid 1910s, a racial hierarchy was firmly in place.

During this time of migration and newfound discovery, many towns supported Negro baseball teams. Piecemeal accounts trickled into local newspaper coverage.²⁰ However, the Negro League teams in Oklahoma were more than sandlotters. Larger cities consistently produced black teams annually, even through some of the leanest years during the Great Depression and through World Wars. By the 1910s, Oklahoma City and Tulsa independently fielded championship baseball clubs.²¹ Exhibiting their professionalism and strong will to win, most clubs recruited throughout the region to pack the rosters full of premier athletes.²² Very early on, owners and managers organized

¹⁹. Ibid., 13.

²⁰. "Local and Personal"; "Baseball Challenge," *Wichita Searchlight*, July 25, 1908; "Leland Giants to Make Long Junket," *Chicago Broad Ax*, January 1, 1910; "Baseball Played A La Africaine," *Times-Democrat* September 7, 1911; "A Negro Ball Game," *Muskogee Times-Democrat*, June 6, 1912; "Tulsa Oilers in Action," *Tulsa Star*, April 18, 1913.

²¹. "Chateau Garden Notes," *Chicago Broad Axe*, August 27, 1910; "Tulsa Negro Team is State Champ," *Tulsa Daily World*, June 17, 1915.

²². "Oklahoma Monarchs May Win Out," *Freeman*, April 16, 1910; "Hard-Fought Games," *Freeman*, July 23, 1910; "Negro Base Ball Club," *Tulsa Star*, April 11, 1913; "Baseball Notes," *Houston Informer*, September 11, 1920; "Baseball Texas Colored League McNulty Park," *Tulsa Daily World*, May 25, 1923; Sylvester Nichols, interview by author, Tulsa, Oklahoma, July 9, August 6, 7, 9, 11, 2013; Porter Reed, interview by author, Muskogee, Oklahoma, February 8, 2014; Eugene Golden, interview by author, Clearview, Oklahoma, February 22, 2014; Ted Owens, interview by author, Sapulpa, Oklahoma, July 17, 2014. Note: Each Negro Leaguer remembered managers and owners seeking talent from nearby cities, around the state, and within region. Wherever they could land the talent, they sought to recruit the best players. Each individual recalled that

with full intentions to win baseball games, and hopefully a championship or two, they sought the best players available.

As spring approached in 1912, writers at the *Tulsa Daily World* embraced the nostalgic aspects of the game and lovingly reminisced about its fairness. For many romanticists, when winter's barren landscape turned to lush green and dogwoods bloomed, so too would baseball return in democratic fashion. The *World* noted how the time was right to "get out those tattered mitts" because town-lot ball neared.²³

Emphasizing the freeness of the game, one writer opined in poetic prose: "A bat and a ball are great levelers of social distinctions where the houses are thick and baseball grounds are few. In spring the fever gets [into] a boy[']s blood and makes him do animal things."²⁴ This daydream statement depicts baseball, within the throes of urbanity, as a childlike, classless game where rules foster egalitarian conduct between the basepaths. Regrettably, the anticipatory bliss laced in lyricism only pertained to those of like kind and color. Despite "leveling the field of social distinction," the ambiguity-wrapped sentiment lacked an all-encompassing view of whom played the game. Democratic rules on the diamond applied separately to teams within a divorced society. The writers' views of the sport in this context more resembles a *faux*-democracy, because laws and good-ole-boy Oklahoma politicking denied many black players permission to play on the same

many Wiley and Langston college baseball players joined several black ballclubs, especially the Oklahoma City Monarchs and the Guthrie Black Spiders.

²³. "Get out Those Tattered Mitts," *Tulsa Daily World*, March 26, 1912.

²⁴. "Country and City Signs," *Tulsa Daily World*, March 26, 1912.

team as whites.²⁵ Only at the grass-and-dirt level, from foul line to foul line, do democratic rules apply to those who play the game.

Mirroring the national trend, racial exclusion also reigned throughout the duration of segregated baseball in Oklahoma, but many white residents of the area in the 1910s conditionally accepted black ballplayers as long as they fit black-jokester stereotypes and provided “plenty of comedy.”²⁶ When white newspapers advertised guaranteed comedy as part of the exhibition, they harkened back to antebellum labels of minstrelsy and Jim Crow expectations as an icebreaking drawing card directed at patrons willing to pay ballpark admission to watch an “Uncle Tom” spectacle. Nineteenth century black baseball historian James Brunson notes, “Minstrelsy paralleled the rise of professional baseball—burnt cork artists played ball, sports journalists narrated colored games as blackface farce, and colored nines engaged in ‘negro’ comedy.”²⁷ Brunson observes the

²⁵ Rob Ruck, *Raceball: How the Major Leagues Colonized the Black and Latin Game* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2011), xiii. Note: Baseball and race historian Rob Ruck criticizes the notion that baseball is a true democracy. He says, “[Baseball is] not as democratic and progressive as it claims to be. Nor has it ever been.” Ruck is right in the same way that political democracy is not a true democracy for all citizens. However, at the “grass-and-dirt level,” the essence of the game is democratic in nature.

²⁶ “Blacks to Perform,” *Tulsa Daily World*, June 6, 1915; “Colts Grab a Game,” *Tulsa Daily World*, June 9, 1915; “Negro Teams to Play Here Today,” *Tulsa Daily World*, June 13, 1915; “Okla. City Giants Defeat Tulsa Colts,” *Tulsa Daily World*, June 15, 1915.

²⁷ James E. Brunson, *The Early Image of Black Baseball: Race and Representation in the Popular Press, 1871-1890* (Jefferson, North Carolina: MacFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 128; “Knot Holes Are Costly,” *Muskogee Times-Democrat*, July 30, 1909; “Baseball Played A La Africaine.” Note: Beyond expectations of comedy and vaudevillian-style minstrelsy on the ballfield, Muskogee’s white newspaper *Times-*

press's role in perpetuating racial stereotypes, but he also begs the question, "Did genuine colored [baseball] artists consider comical [showboating and] coaching minstrelsy?"²⁸ Perhaps some players did while others loathed the farcical frolics, but there will likely never be a definitive answer. What is evident, however, was that black newspapers reporting from the same time period rarely mentioned comedic antics as a lure to the ballpark.²⁹ Despite either *having to* or *choosing to* play up their blackness and pantomime about the field, occasionally racial coherence budded between ballfield chalk lines.

Demeanor toward African Americans in the press began to change for the positive by the 1920s. Perhaps the difference in reportage stemmed from blacks contributing to the World War effort a few years before, or maybe from the more "liberal" trends that budded during the Roaring Twenties. The reason could also be because Negro League ballclubs sent in their own write-ups about teams and games. Texas baseball historian Rob Fink states that in the late 1920s, Texas-Oklahoma-Louisiana (T-O-L) colored league requirements expected regional teams to "bring their local African[-]American

Democrat openly published derogatory and downright scathing articles in "slave" dialect about African-American fans and ballplayers. Illustrating Brunson's example that "sports journalists narrated colored games as blackface farce," the articles listed above quote spectators in slang, and call athletes "mistahs," and ballgame officials "empires."

²⁸. Brunson, *The Early Image of Black Baseball: Race and Representation in the Popular Press, 1871-1890*, 168.

²⁹. "Base Ball," *Tulsa Star*, May 29, 1915; "Sporting Dope," *Tulsa Star*, June 5, 1915; "Tulsa Colored Base Ball Team Wins State Championship," *Tulsa Star*, June 19, 1915.

newspaper reporters in order to inform the public of the league.”³⁰ Game updates from the black press might have made it to white newspapers for additional reach, or those agencies passed along updates of doings within the organizations to white staff writers for publication. Surprisingly, even after the bitter 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, fewer periodicals disparaged or degraded African-American ballplayers. After 1922, the language in local journalism grew noticeably more professional and encouraging. Black baseball remained popular in both black and white news dailies throughout the decade.³¹

Clues in newspaper ads reveal that mixed crowds frequently turned out to watch black baseball by the 1920s and 1930s. On multiple occasions, Negro Leaguers blurred the lines of segregation, periodically transcending racial antagonism. When the local white teams traveled on the road, black ballgame promoters capitalized on an opportunity to attract white patrons by advertising that Western League and Major League scores via telegraph wire would be posted every inning, and they often set aside special seating for whites.³² Fink notes that during a 1929 T-O-L game in Tulsa between the Black Oilers

³⁰. Rob Fink, *Playing in Shadows: Texas and Negro League Baseball*, Sport in the American West (Lubbock, Tex.: Texas Tech University Press, 2010), 77.

³¹. Note: Several Oklahoma newspapers regularly covered upcoming Negro League games, and occasionally reported outcomes and player rosters. White newspapers *Tulsa World*, *Tulsa Tribune*, and *Oklahoman* in Oklahoma City actually reported more accounts on black baseball because they ran daily, whereas most black newspapers of the time ran on weekly basis.

³². "Okla. City Giants Defeat Tulsa Colts"; "Two Negro Teams Will Clash at Association Park at 3 O'clock," *Tulsa Daily World*, September 5, 1915; "Black Izzies' Meet Black Oilers Today," *Morning Tulsa Daily World*, September 10, 1922; "Baseball Tulsa Black Sox vs. Ft. Worht Black Panthers," *Tulsa Daily World*, May 11, 1924; "Baseball McNulty Park Tenth and Elgin Today Tulsa Black Oilers," *Tulsa Daily World*, May 10, 1925; "Baseball Today Texas Colored League," *Tulsa Daily World*, July 4,

and Oklahoma City Black Indians, “a racially mixed crowd, with whites sitting on one side of the bleachers and African Americans on the other, watched the two teams battle for fifteen innings.”³³ The athletes proved themselves as professionals by hustling and playing hard in front of mixed crowds in packed stadiums, often strutting with a little swagger to jazz up the game. Historian Neil Lanctot contends that “baseball occupied an undeniably important social and economic role in black communities.”³⁴ The presence of local Negro League teams filled a void wrought out of separation, and those organizations established a loyalty among many people in African-American communities that otherwise had no “home team” to root for. For the many fans in cities that supported both a professional white team and a Negro League team, they had the opportunity to enjoy twice as much baseball. Yet this window of civility failed at eliminating Jim Crow policies. Despite the lack of social progress outside the ballpark, when black teams drew sizable white crowds to segregated ballgames, and on those special occasions when they played in interracial exhibitions, they softened the rigid

1925; "Baseball McNulty Park Tenth and Elgin Today and Monday," *Tulsa Daily World*, June 5, 1927; "Baseball Tonight: Western League Park," *The Oklahoman*, June 18, 1931; "Negro Ball Teams in Two Tilts Today," *The Oklahoman*, September 13, 1931; "Black Indians Play Fast Foe Thursday," *The Oklahoman*, June 23, 1932; "Baseball Texas League Park Sunday-3:00 P. M.," *The Oklahoman*, June 6, 1937; "Negro Ball Clubs Here Sunday," *The Oklahoman*, June 4, 1937; "Negro Ball Clubs Play Here Today," *The Oklahoman*, June 6, 1937.

³³. Fink, *Playing in Shadows: Texas and Negro League Baseball*, 83.

³⁴. Neil Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), viii.

boundaries of separation. This public acceptance became a silent contribution that would later provide future opportunities for local integration in the mid 1950s.³⁵

Oklahoma sports continued to parallel sports around much of the country, as it remained largely segregated until the early 1950s. Although Jackie Robinson's groundbreaking first step across the major league's color line occurred in April of 1947, independent black baseball's popularity began a more rapid descent after local professional teams began adding black players to their minor league rosters—a trend that followed Dallas Eagles owner Dick Burnett's intrepid move to integrate the Texas League (TL) with Dave Hoskins in early 1952.³⁶ Weeks after Hoskins joined the TL, the Oklahoma City Indians added Bill Greason to their pitching staff; Greason becoming the first black to play professionally in Oklahoma. The Tulsa Oilers began enhancing their roster with “token” African-American and dark-complexioned Caribbean athletes in 1953.³⁷ Burnett's choice to forcibly integrate the Texas League's antiquated tradition had less to do with bowing to national pressures for inclusion or making a public stance

³⁵. "Oklahoma Again Beat Indians," *Freeman*, May 7, 1910; "Blacks to Perform."; "Tulsa Colts Win from O. C. Giants," *Tulsa Daily World*, June 16, 1915; "Black Oiler to Scrap Giants in Holiday Program," *Morning Tulsa Daily World*, August 20, 1922; "Baseball Today: Dallas Black Giants," *Tulsa Daily World*, August 20, 1922; "Benefit Game for Peacock," *Miami Daily News-Record (Oklahoma)*, August 5, 1949; "Okla. City Club Signs Righthander," *Oklahoma Eagle*, July 31, 1952; "Harmon Will Play in Oilers' Opener, Schultz," *Oklahoma Eagle*, April 9, 1953. Note: The articles cited above provide context from the early years of black baseball up until Bill Greason integrated Oklahoma City in 1952, followed by Chuck Harmon in Tulsa in 1953.

³⁶. "Football Decides Dallas Baseball Club to Bring in Negro Players," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 28, 1952.

³⁷. "Okla. City Club Signs Righthander"; "Harmon Will Play in Oilers' Opener, Schultz."

against segregation. Rather, the shake-up had an ulterior motive: to boost the bottom line with gate attendance and luring people through the turnstiles.³⁸ The addition of black players also brought with it black fans, a move that turned the extra attendance into dollar signs. As integration spread throughout the lower ranks of the minor leagues, baseball black leagues lost momentum that would eventually lead to their demise. Integration brought with it progress, but it killed a black institution in the process.

* * *

Armfuls of books about the history of baseball in Oklahoma exist, but the largest and most glaring omission from the majority of these works is the lack of coverage of professional and semiprofessional Negro League teams that thrived in the state during the same time when white teams garnered the most attention.³⁹ Perhaps the subject matter

³⁸. "Many Baseball Teams in South to Use Negroes," *The Oklahoman*, January 30, 1953; Bruce Adelson, *Brushing Back Jim Crow: The Integration of Minor-League Baseball in the American South* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 57, 58.

³⁹. Note: Author Peter G. Pierce has published five books about various leagues and small-town baseball in Oklahoma. Chris Jensen thoroughly covers all the states in his *Baseball State by State: Major and Negro League Players, Ballparks, Museums, and Historical Sites*, but he neglects the significance of state-based black teams and players. Bing and Patty Hampton oversaw the publication of *Old Times to the Goodtimes* a nostalgic and celebratory book about baseball in the state's capital with text written by Patrick Petree. Bob Burke compliments the Petree/Hampton endeavor with his Oklahoma City minor league baseball projects, *Baseball in Oklahoma City* and *Glory Days of Summer*, a project written with Royce Parr and Kenny Franks. Royce Parr also specializes in Native American ballplayers from Oklahoma. Wayne McCombs has Tulsa minor league professional baseball history buttoned up with his definitive *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa* and *Baseball in Tulsa* books. And there are libraries full of books about major leaguers from Oklahoma, particularly Mickey Mantle and Dizzy Dean.

failed to meet each writer's criteria, as many times the term "semiprofessional" carries a stigma and air of insignificance when compared to household names like the Tulsa Oilers, Oklahoma City Indians, Tulsa Drillers, or Oklahoma City 89ers. Nonetheless, within the black communities of Oklahoma they celebrated other household names like the Tulsa Colts, Oklahoma Monarchs, Tulsa Black Oilers, Oklahoma City Black Indians, Guthrie Black Spiders, and the Tulsa T-Town Clowns. The teams were black ball teams for the local African-American populace. Even though owners and managers often recruited from out-of-state, many of the players on those teams lived in the same neighborhoods as their fans. Oklahoma continually fielded competitive baseball teams, but the men were more than simple athletes; they served as mentors and role models for young black kids.⁴⁰ Some gave equipment to up-and-coming athletes of the next generation, others taught little league, and nearly all of them were friends of families all across their cities.⁴¹

For the most part, Oklahoma baseball historians spend their efforts chronicling professional organizations because they have a personal connection to the teams they cover, sources are easily located, and many are readily available. The undertone in much of their works revolves around an affinity for the nostalgia of the game; they document the "Golden Era" when the sport still assumed the title as the national pastime. As the Golden Era tarnished when a new gilded era encroached on tradition with polyester, skin-tight uniforms, and Tom Selleck mustaches, they watched as their reliable heroes, who

⁴⁰. Nichols, interview by author; Reed, interview by author.

⁴¹. Nichols, interview by author; Robert "Bob" Pearson, interview by author, Tulsa, Oklahoma, September 6, 2014; Reed, interview by author.

had heretofore spent entire careers with one team, segued into an era of players unions, free agency, and public excess. The new image of baseball flaunted prima donnas with stadium-sized egos, and the old ways quickly faded into the cornfields of Iowa. Those authors, whose love of the game from “a simpler time,” want to see preserved the sport when baseball cards meant both nothing and everything. For them, they hold fast to their own pasts through a child’s game that they abandoned in adulthood. Local minor league teams keep the flames of reliability alive for those who remember the throwback era; the players perpetually stay the same age and have yet to be tainted by the ugliness of the business, and retain the zeal and passion for hitting, running, and throwing.

Remiss from the majority of Oklahoma authors’ works are the existences and contributions of Negro League teams. Save for a few pages, local black baseball predominantly remains undocumented. Two definitive baseball books, *Let’s Gooooooooooooo Tulsa* and *Glory Days of Summer*, explore the rich history of the sport in Oklahoma, but both neglect uniform content about the segregated side of the pastime. When Wayne McCombs embarked on *Let’s Gooooooooooooo Tulsa*, the definitive “bible” on Tulsa minor league professional baseball, with little more than a legal pad and pen, he conducted interviews, perused a plethora of old programs, and spun through year after year of newspaper microfilm. McCombs found very little Negro League sources that he felt relevant to his project and readily admits that he had less access to archives that are more readily available today.⁴² Although McCombs’s book specifically covers

⁴² Wayne McCombs, interview by author, Tulsa, Oklahoma, March 2012; Wayne McCombs, *Let’s Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Wayne McCombs, 1990).

professional minor league baseball in Tulsa and lacks local Negro League coverage, his thorough documentation of old ballparks in the city, where Negro Leaguers often played, provides valuable background information. Oklahoma baseball enthusiasts Bob Burke, Kenny Franks, and Royse Parr published *Glory Days of Summer* that documents over a century of Oklahoma baseball from the 1870s to the 1990s. *Glory Days* dedicates a short chapter to African-American players from the state, but the authors primarily focus on black Oklahomans who became professional Negro or Major Leaguers.⁴³ They briefly mention a few notable blackball teams around the state, but they missed an opportune chance to expound upon the history of the many black teams that stretched from the 1890s to the 1960s.

With all of the bad news, there is good news. A growing number of historians now focus their efforts on telling the stories of people previously forgotten or ignored by the masses. Oklahoma Center for Poets and Writers executive director Teresa Miller applauds the groundbreaking works of Angie Debo and John Hope Franklin who both revised history by documenting disgraceful episodes in Oklahoma's past.⁴⁴ "When we

⁴³ Bob Burke et al., *Glory Days of Summer: The History of Baseball in Oklahoma*, Oklahoma Horizons Series (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1999).

⁴⁴ Teresa Miller, "'Oklahoma Writers: A Literary Tableau' Exhibit," ed. C-SPAN, Tulsa, Oklahoma (Washington, D.C.: National Cable Satellite Corporation, 2015); Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1940); John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York, New York: Knopf, 1967). Note: Teresa Miller quotes Angie Debo as saying, "I violated history in telling the truth" about crimes committed against Native Americans. Debo's "violation" stemmed from her career spent correcting the misrepresented or forgotten histories of Native Americans and Oklahomans. In his book, *From Slavery to Freedom*, John Hope Franklin became one of

look at Oklahoma history,” says Miller, “we see that it’s a matter of going back and collecting history. Revisionist history is our real history in many cases.”⁴⁵ Now, more than ever, there remains the need to tell the stories that were once sequestered or shouted down by the loud voice of majority. Many surprised Oklahomans lament how they were years into their adulthoods before they learned about the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, but the foresight and perseverance of a few have made great strides to correct such oversights. African-American writers like John Hope Franklin, Ralph Ellison, Eddie Faye Gates, Hannibal Johnson, Currie Ballard, and journalist Ed Goodwin have rightfully given voice to black Oklahoma. Their indefatigable efforts have unearthed and disseminated narrative accounts of the Great Migration to Oklahoma’s “New Promised Land,” of the hopping blues-soaked Deep Deuce district in Oklahoma City, of the boom and bust of Greenwood’s Black Wall Street in Tulsa, and of family oral histories depicting what life was like for African Americans on a daily basis.⁴⁶

Recently, the tide has shifted towards more baseball authors emphasizing regional significance to showcase how noteworthy people, teams, or events affected certain

the first historians to remind the world about the crimes and ruin that occurred during the 1921 Race Riot.

⁴⁵. Miller, "'Oklahoma Writers: A Literary Tableau' Exhibit."

⁴⁶. Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*; Ralph Ellison, *Trading Twelves* (New York, New York: Modern Library, 2000); Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York, New York: Vintage International, 1995); Gates, *They Came Searching: How Blacks Sought the Promised Land in Tulsa*; Hannibal Johnson, *Black Wall Street: From Riot to Renaissance in Tulsa's Historic Greenwood District* (Austin, Texas: Eakin Press, 1998); Hannibal Johnson, *Mama Used to Say: Wit and Wisdom from the Heart & Soul* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Hawk Publishing Group, 2003); Ed Goodwin. interview by author, Tulsa, Oklahoma, July 9, 2013.

areas—less “national-centric” and more “local-concentrated.” Due to the overabundance of the same stories repeatedly told, a few researchers now focus their efforts away from macro net-throwing to a more micro-magnification scope. After all, many contemporary historians consider the crux of all past events to be “local history” because they first began as homegrown affairs.⁴⁷ Regional stories of teams and players outside the distinguished halls of Cooperstown or celebrated in the jazzy confines of 18th and Vine in Kansas City’s Negro League Baseball Museum now find purpose as historians begin to magnify upon the significance of the larger story. They unpack and contextualize the reality that black baseball was more than amateurs playing for recreation.

African-American cultural historian and Negro Leagues expert Phil Dixon recently embarked on project to commemorate ninety years since the Kansas City Monarchs won the first Colored World Series and to illustrate their influence across the country. Calling it “The Kansas City Monarchs in Our Home Town,” Dixon has dedicated himself to follow the path of the Negro Leaguers through ninety cities and small towns.⁴⁸ He plans to record his experiences during the tour in an upcoming book to

⁴⁷. Note: Public Historian Bill Bryans refers to all history as “local history” because even national events originating in New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, or Los Angeles all occurred at the local level.

⁴⁸. Chris King, "Negro Leagues expert Phil S. Dixon to Speak at Carondelet Branch Library on Saturday," *St. Louis American*, February 4, 2015; Mark Hughes, "Historian to Tell of Local Baseball Games against National Negro League Teams," *Muskogee Phoenix*, March 23, 2015; "Author Phil S. Dixon to visit MPL," *Marshall Democrat-News (Missouri)*, March 31, 2015; Phil Dixon, "The Kansas City Monarchs in Our Home Town," public speaking event, recorded by author, Muskogee, Oklahoma, March 24, 2015.

demonstrate how the Monarchs' reach affected the towns where they visited.⁴⁹ Texas historian Rob Fink effectively documents the contributions of African-American ballplayers in the state and in the professional Negro League.⁵⁰ Academic baseball historian Leslie Heaphy weaves the importance of the Oklahoma City Monarchs into her book *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960* that covers the Negro Leagues from inception during Reconstruction through its demise in the early 1960s.⁵¹ Magnifying upon the positive effects of interracial relations during barnstorming tours, author Timothy Gay meritoriously covers the exploits of Dizzy Dean, Satchel Paige, and Bob Feller prior to integration.⁵² Jules Tygiel, Larry Moffi and Jonathan Kronstadt, and Bruce Adelson have separately collected interviews with previously-overlooked players and assembled several oral histories detailing the impact of black baseball players as they navigated the various levels of minor league baseball.⁵³ Each author influenced this work by providing greater

⁴⁹. Dixon, "The Kansas City Monarchs in Our Home Town."

⁵⁰. Fink, *Playing in Shadows: Texas and Negro League Baseball*; Robert C. Fink, "Semi-professional African American Baseball in Texas before the Great Depression," in *The African American Experience in Texas: An Anthology*, ed. Bruce A. Glasrud and James M. Smallwood (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2007).

⁵¹. Leslie A. Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2003).

⁵². Timothy M. Gay, *Satch, Dizzy & Rapid Robert: The Wild Saga of Interracial Baseball before Jackie Robinson* (Simon & Schuster, 2010).

⁵³. Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Larry Moffi and Jonathan Kronstadt, *Crossing the Line: Black Major Leaguers, 1947-1959* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1994); Adelson, *Brushing Back Jim Crow: The Integration of Minor-League Baseball in the American South*.

context and needed background information during the segregated era in which Oklahomans played.

* * *

The methodology and purpose for this work is fairly simple. By combining sources tucked away in seemingly-irrelevant publications, locating obscure archives, combing through hundreds of newspapers and microfilm rolls, and tracking down players or fans who remember black teams, this research stitches together the rich history of Oklahoma Negro League baseball. There exists a vacancy between the two sport histories. Because Oklahoma baseball authors have regularly overlooked African-American ballclubs, or only mentioned a few teams in passing. And because semiprofessional teams played outside the realm of the black major leagues, they receive little praise from professional Negro League enthusiasts.⁵⁴ The goal of this project seeks to be “the glue” that adheres local baseball narratives to the professional Negro League at large. It disseminates to a wider audience a broad overview of the sport with a few intimate portraits to connect readers to those who lived during the era.

Much of this research comes from primary sources, particularly from interviews and newspaper archives such as the *Tulsa Star*, *Oklahoma Eagle*, *Tulsa World*, *Tulsa*

⁵⁴. Note: In the past, historians often surpassed teams that they considered “semiprofessional,” because they unfairly viewed those organizations as amateur or nothing more than a group of sandlot players. The truth, though, most teams competed three to five days a week for a whole season while many players continued to hold down steady fulltime jobs. Although Oklahoma Negro League teams played outside the “Negro major leagues,” they traveled the same routes in jalopies or on bumpy bus rides, all the while trying to dodge Jim Crow confrontation.

Tribune, the *Oklahoman*, and several out-of-state papers. Other means for investigation included combing through several city directories, tax assessor land records, aerial photographs, and very limited pictures from the Oklahoma Negro League era. The troubles in researching the Negro Leagues are that baseball articles and boxscores rarely covered the minutia of play-by-play or even first names of starters, which compounds the rigors of research.⁵⁵ Newspapers rarely followed up on colored baseball contests, leaving the meat of the sports sections to the Tulsa Oilers or Oklahoma City Indians. In the rare instances that rosters made it to press, the few black players listed in boxscores may forever be known only by last name or nickname. However, through continued searching and meticulous scouring of newspapers and reliable internet sources, some players have been identified. But for every Black Rider, “Smut” Alexander, “Buzzard” Franklin, “Black Wax” Edwards, and Buster Tyson, there are many singular-named or nicknamed Harrises, Campbells, Glenns, Lloyds, Williamses, and Lefties.

Several secondary sources compliment this work. Rob Fink’s book *Playing in Shadows* about Texas Negro League baseball parallels much of the black baseball happenings in Oklahoma. Fink devotes an entire chapter to the Negro Texas-Oklahoma-Louisiana League (T-O-L) of the late 1920s, which included Tulsa and Oklahoma City.⁵⁶

⁵⁵. Gay, *Satch, Dizzy & Rapid Robert: The Wild Saga of Interracial Baseball before Jackie Robinson*, 30. Note: Author Timothy Gay experienced much of the same problem with the lack of consistency in primary sources as he researched his book on barnstorming. Says Gay, “Even in the salad days of the Negro Leagues, game accounts and box scores often didn’t appear in newspapers. Thanks to well-heeled promoters, black contests tended to be hyped in advance, but few were covered in much depth afterward.”

⁵⁶. Fink, *Playing in Shadows: Texas and Negro League Baseball*.

Phil Dixon's photographic history of the professional Negro Leagues provides much-needed background on players from the state who went on to have extended professional careers.⁵⁷ Jules Tygiel and Larry Moffi and Jonathan Kronstadt flesh out the end of the local Negro League with their documentations of players who integrated the larger scope of baseball. In the early 1980s, Tygiel had the foresight to record the post-Jackie Robinson effect on all of professional baseball and to document the experiences of many African Americans during their days in the minor leagues.⁵⁸ Moffi and Kronstadt's *Crossing the Line: Black Major Leaguers, 1947-1959*, focuses specifically on black major leaguers as they began integrating the lower levels of professional baseball and troubles along the way to the majors.⁵⁹ Each writer allots considerable space to Dallas's Dave Hoskins who first integrated the Texas League, Oklahoma City's Bill Greason, the first African American to play for the minor league Indians, and Charles Harmon, the first African American to integrate the Tulsa Oilers. Integral to this research, Tygiel and Moffi, and Kronstadt, incorporate oral histories that they supplement with multiple primary and secondary sources to illustrate the racial strife players experienced on the road and playing at home.

The goal of this study seeks not to rehash the history of the professional Negro Leagues or to dissect the genesis of how baseball came to be segregated in the late nineteenth century; there already exists an overabundance of books to cover those

⁵⁷. Dixon and Hannigan, *The Negro Baseball Leagues: A Photographic History*.

⁵⁸. Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*.

⁵⁹. Moffi and Kronstadt, *Crossing the Line: Black Major Leaguers, 1947-1959*.

subjects.⁶⁰ Additionally, an effort has been made to keep to a minimum the retelling of iconic events, or “legends,” within the black big leagues, or how Jackie Robinson’s first steps across the major league color line with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 impacted the game and the growing civil rights movement. Granted, both had a profound effect on the longevity (and eventual demise) of black baseball across the country, which included Oklahoma. However, those stories have been told and retold ad nauseam. On a few occasions, some sources have been consciously ignored because they relate little to the subject matter, to Oklahoma, or have been deemed too romanticized by the author.

For instance, Ken Burns’ *Baseball* is a wonderful documentary filled with a wealth of historical information, yet it has been omitted because the coverage of Brooklyn Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey and “race man” Jackie Robinson tends to focus mainly on how Rickey’s morals and staunch Methodist background inspired his charitable act, and how Robinson became the premier civil rights patriarch and martyr for black America. Yet the African-American men like Larry Doby and Hank Thompson who followed the Dodgers infielder, just weeks after his monumental steps, continue to receive much less attention despite playing in a separate league or on another team. Also, Rickey’s true intent to integrate the majors has been called into attention and carries mixed interpretations; many African Americans tend to celebrate his intestinal fortitude for taking a risk, while critics speculate that Branch Rickey’s true intent to

⁶⁰ For more information about baseball, segregation, and the Negro Leagues, requisite readings include Donn Rogosin’s *Invisible Men*, Phil S. Dixon’s *The Negro Leagues: A Photographic History*, Leslie Heaphy’s *The Negro Leagues: 1869-1960*, Rob Ruck’s *Raceball: How the Major Leagues Colonized the Black and Latin Game*, and Neil Lanctot’s *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*.

integrate was not specifically an altruistic move to make the game more egalitarian, but instead for gate receipts. Black players meant black spectators spending their black-earned money and thereby doubling attendance at the turnstiles, a strategy not specific to Brooklyn baseball after Branch Rickey opened the door. When other Organized Baseball owners saw the successes of Robinson and the impact at the box office, only then would they consider adding blacks to their rosters.⁶¹

Rather, this project revolves around the complexities of black baseball in Oklahoma that stretch from territorial days to the era when civil rights reached a fever pitch. Racism and Jim Crow certainly dominated much of everyday life in Oklahoma; however, during the oppressive and subjugating day-in-day-out routine of “keeping the Negro in his place,” occasionally African-American baseball players transcended up from the bottom rung of racial hierarchy. Evidence of this appears in how often white press covered black baseball events, particularly in Oklahoma City and Tulsa newspapers, and certainly when black ballclubs met local white clubs on the diamond for exhibition. By the 1930s, white versus black baseball became more socially acceptable engagements that extended well into the 1960s when the Negro Leagues in Oklahoma finally ceased.

⁶¹. Ken Burns, Lynn Novick, and Geoffrey C. Ward. *Baseball*. (Alexandria, Virginia: PBS Home Video, 2004); "Dallas Negro Pitcher Brilliant on Mound and at the Plate," *Oklahoma Eagle*, May 1, 1952; "Tribe Signs Negro," *The Oklahoman*, July 29, 1952; "Okla. City Club Signs Righthander."

CHAPTER II

AROUND THE HORN: BLACKBALLERS OF OKLAHOMA PLAYING IN A GRASS AND DIRT DEMOCRACY

"In discussing the history of a people one must distinguish between what has actually happened and what those who have written the history have said has happened. So far as the actual history of the American Negro is concerned, there is nothing particularly new about it. It is an exciting story, a remarkable story. It is the story of slavery and freedom, humanity and inhumanity, democracy and its denial. It is tragedy and triumph, suffering and compassion, sadness and joy."⁶²

—John Hope Franklin, "The New Negro History," *Crisis*, February 1977

Twenty-seven-year old third baseman “Chatter” Jack Perkins digs in at the plate during the eighth inning for the white industrial ball team Wilson & Co. Packers as he faces off against the hometown Guthrie Black Spiders. The weather is hot, yet pleasant, and a southerly wind blows just enough to cool the humid July heat and sweat collected over the seven previous innings. Perkins readies himself, his first full year as a baseball-only player. He eyes the pitcher, hoping to produce in the at bat. The Black Spiders ace

⁶² John Hope Franklin Center at Duke University, “Quotations by John Hope Franklin,” Duke University, 2009, accessed August 18, 2015, <http://jhfc.duke.edu/johnhopefranklin/quotes.html>.

toes the pitching rubber and hurls a pitch toward Perkins. The throw is chest-high and inside, but too far inside. The ball strikes Perkins right at the ribcage just below his heart. He falls to the ground from the concussive shock to his body and fades from consciousness. Hurried attempts rush to get Chatter to the local hospital for emergency care, only too late. Perkins arrives at Guthrie St. Benedict's Hospital, only to be declared "dead upon arrival."⁶³

The Jack Perkins story illustrates an interesting dichotomy about race in Oklahoma during the late 1940s. While white and black baseball teams quite frequently played against each other in the Sooner State, racial tension recurrently chafed between the two societies. Interestingly though, when Guthrie's black hurler felled Jack Perkins in 1948, not one newspaper article read: "WHITE BATSMAN KILLED BY BLACK PITCHER," or anything of the like. In fact, when the *Oklahoman* went to press with several articles on the incident, the newspaper remained silent on the subject of race; the only indicator of color was the name of the pitcher's team.⁶⁴ Instead, the daily focused

⁶³. "Pitched Ball Fatal to Jack Perkins, City Ballplayer," *The Oklahoman*, July 3, 1948; Weather Underground, "Weather History for Oklahoma City, OK", Weather Underground <http://www.wunderground.com/history/airport/KOKC/2013/05/31/DailyHistory.html> (accessed April 12, 2014 2014); "Perkins Rites Set Tuesday," *The Oklahoman*, July 4, 1948; "Packers Honor Jack Perkins," *The Oklahoman*, July 4, 1948; "Perkins Rites Set Tuesday; Game Put Off," *The Oklahoman*, July 4, 1948; "Perkins Real Softball Vet," *The Oklahoman*, July 8, 1948; "Guthrie Has Benefit for Perkins Family," *The Oklahoman*, July 16, 1948.

⁶⁴. "Pitched Ball Fatal to Jack Perkins, City Ballplayer"; "Packers Honor Jack Perkins"; "Perkins Rites Set Tuesday"; "Perkins Rites Set Tuesday; Game Put Off"; "Perkins Real Softball Vet"; "Guthrie Has Benefit for Perkins Family"; "Perkins Real Softball Vet."

on the event and eulogized Jack Perkins' life and athletic career. Race issues were absent following the tragedy. Exactly two weeks after Perkins' death, on the same field where he died, the Wilson Packers again met the Guthrie Spiders to play a benefit game for the grieving family.⁶⁵ The region mourned because a well-liked player died and it mattered little that it happened during an interracial baseball game.

Historically, Oklahoman's behaviors and attitudes toward race have been nothing short of contradictory—exclusionary dogmas muddled with acceptance and amiability. According to Samuel Dester:

Oklahoma resembled that of the South – in that it was segregated, with all of the cultural, political, and economic factors that come with such a set up - but how, in other ways, it was different. . . . Such differentiation arises out of the complex place of Oklahoma in regional history, straddling the divide between the American South and the West.⁶⁶

When the Oklahoma legislature implemented Senate Bill One, they intentionally complicated life for blacks with Jim Crow policies.⁶⁷ The law, compounded with previously-existing anti-racial sentiments, effectively separated African Americans from white society. Race-motivated crimes intermittently dotted the landscape across Oklahoma during the early twentieth century; lynchings and a devastating race riot in

⁶⁵. "Guthrie Has Benefit for Perkins Family."

⁶⁶. Dester, "How Southern Is Oklahoma? Segregation in Agricultural Extension, 1914-1965", 2.

⁶⁷. O'dell, "Oklahoma Encyclopedia of History and Culture: Senate Bill One,"; Smallwood, "Oklahoma Encyclopedia of History and Culture: Segregation,"; Dester, "How Southern Is Oklahoma? Segregation in Agricultural Extension, 1914-1965", 10.

1921 further scarred cultural relations.⁶⁸ As a result, black towns and dedicated black parts of cities cropped up all over the state draping a necklace of African-American settlements across the rolling Oklahoma hills and windswept plains.

Separatism and societal superiority complexes indeed severed possibilities for black and white ballplayers to play together on the same teams. From the sport's inception in the nineteenth century, race-based ideologies and popular eugenics pseudoscience excluded many non-Caucasian ballplayers from performing in white leagues. By the late 1800s, unspoken rules disallowed people of color to compete with their white counterparts. Although the infamous "Gentlemen's Agreement" nationally segregated the professional game at the major league and minor league levels, black and

⁶⁸. "One Hundred Men Lynched Negro Woman at Wagoner," *Tulsa Star*, April 4, 1914; Ruth Sigler-Avery, "Charred Negro Killed in Tulsa Race Riot, 2012," Ruth Sigler Avery Tulsa Race Riot Archive; "White Man Who Set Fire to Negro Boy Goes Free," *Oklahoma Eagle* December 26, 1942; Eugene Golden, interview by author, Clearview, Oklahoma, February 22, 2014; Dianna Everett, "Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture: Lynching", Oklahoma Historical Society <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/l/ly001.html> (accessed March 30, 2014). Note: African-American newspaper *Tulsa Star* indicates that by 1914, just seven years after statehood, two African-American women "and a dozen or more men" died at the hands of another because they were black. According to the *Star*, "Not a single man has been punished in any way for participating in the lynchings." Former Negro Leaguer Eugene Golden echoes the sentiment, saying, "The last person lynched in Okfuskee County happened in 1913." Evidence from the Tulsa Race Riot that classifies as lynching reveals a dead man's charred body in the middle of a street. By definition, "lynching" last occurred in Oklahoma in the 1930s. However, race crimes still occurred into the 1940s when a young white man purposefully doused a six-year-old black boy with a flammable liquid and set him afire.

white baseball teams occasionally battled on the diamond in the form of barnstorming or in local exhibition games.⁶⁹

During the tumultuous early years in Oklahoma's history, the two cultures found affable ways to interact. Sports enabled a few talented African-American athletes the ability to periodically surmount ideological obstacles; black baseball served as a gateway to lessen racial tensions. Although African Americans of the time realized that Jim Crow bound them to an inferior position in society, they often used humor and pizzazz to entertain both black and white fans. But many Negro Leaguers never considered themselves circus performers; they were tried-and-proven competitive athletes. These hybridized concepts of race expose how Oklahoma both coincided *and* differed from the surrounding states where Oklahoma Negro Leaguers played. Regardless of urban or rural locations, both racial discord and harmony simultaneously existed in cities like Muskogee, Guthrie, Clearview, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa. Before integration spread throughout the minor leagues of Oklahoma in the 1950s, Negro League baseball teams in the state offered more than minstrel sideshow antics for white people's entertainment; the sport also provided exceptional black athletes opportunities to occasionally transcend racial barriers.

Jim Crow dwelled in both rural and urban areas in Oklahoma, and some people seemingly celebrated white supremacy. Professor of mass communications Christopher

⁶⁹ Leslie A. Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2003), 4. Note: Barnstorming refers to traveling teams that "storm" into a city to play an exhibition game with locals or another traveling team. As fast as a storm passes, the visiting team departs just as quickly to play another team in another town the next day.

Campbell calls this “overt racism,” which regularly occurred in the early part of the twentieth century.⁷⁰ White newspaper articles often depicted black athletes as mongrels or derelicts who dwelled at the bottom of the ranks of social and racial hierarchy. In 1911, the *Muskogee Times-Democrat* published a scathing article about baseball “A La Africaine” that likened the crowd at Muskogee Athletic Park to nothing more than skin color, eyes, and pearly whites: “White eyeballs and glistening teeth made the stand look like a big chocolate cake, decorated with white frosting.”⁷¹ The Muskogee daily continued to denigrate local blacks as it caricatured them in derogatory dialect, calling attendants “sportin’ coons” and “spectatahs.”⁷² The editorial flaunted racist notions with offensive drivel throughout the bulk of the article and opined that the visiting Kansas City club, full of “a husky lot of black boys . . . would have easily sold for \$1,500 each in the old days.”⁷³ A few years later, a group of Tulsans threatened to boycott local Association Park because blacks sat in the grandstands with whites.⁷⁴ The ballpark owners reacted quickly, and within days of the initial outcry they added new bleachers to the complex.⁷⁵

As Oklahoma swirled with racial and political polarization, small episodes of harmony also occurred—particularly on the baseball field. For nine innings, roughly a

⁷⁰ Christopher P. Campbell, *Race and News: Critical Perspectives* (New York: London, 2012), 75.

⁷¹ “Baseball Played A La Africaine,” *Times-Democrat* September 7, 1911.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ “Bleachers to Be Erected at Once,” *Tulsa Daily World*, May 17, 1914.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

little over two hours, grass-and-dirt democracy played out for black athletes ninety feet at a time, especially when they matched the hometown white squad. To borrow from sports historian Elliot Gorn's theory that for pugilists boxing serves the lower ranks of society as way to attain equality, baseball also mimics that process. Gorn says, "Ideally, the ring was also a true democracy, in which men succeeded or failed under conditions of perfect equality of opportunity."⁷⁶ When baseball enthusiasts throw around the term democracy, they mean much the same. Regardless of race, physical stature, or socioeconomic status—between the baselines—all men are allotted the same opportunities to hit, field, and score.⁷⁷ When black teams played white teams, both groups abided by those instituted rules of old.

A closer look at statehood newspapers from cities that had sizable black populations reveals that whites occasionally accepted black athletes for their talents. In 1910, the *Oklahoman* wrote a glowing assessment about the local African-American baseball team calling them "classy and full of spirit."⁷⁸ Despite incidents of hostility toward people of color, many public dailies dedicated articles and ads for upcoming black ballgames, and periodically published wrap-ups from previous games. When the teams

⁷⁶ Elliot Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), 66.

⁷⁷ "Re-Organized Oilers Defeat Bartlesville," *Tulsa Daily World*, April 29, 1913; "Tulsa Black Oilers Defeat All-Stars," *The Oklahoman*, May 14, 1928. Note: One-armed outfielder Oscar Frame "batted well and fielded perfectly" for the Tulsa (colored) Oilers in 1913; In 1928, the Tulsa Black Oilers pitcher Harris earned a spot on the roster despite being "deaf and dumb."

⁷⁸ "Oklahoma City Negroes Beat Kansas City Blacks," *The Oklahoman*, April 18, 1910.

played competitively and exhibited their athletic prowess, fans of both races noticed. However, their performances on the field hardly meant that the players had somehow experienced a stroke of good luck. Historian Leslie Heaphy declares, “Nothing happened . . . to suddenly give African Americans baseball skills they had not possessed before. Talent always existed, but players got few opportunities to play in the white professional leagues because of segregation. Instead they created their own opportunities.”⁷⁹ Local African-American baseball players used their God-given talents to ascend to another level. In fact, the *Oklahoman* and *Tulsa World* regularly lauded the accomplishments of Oklahoma Negro League teams.⁸⁰

White fans frequently attended Negro League ballgames in Oklahoma, perhaps in smaller numbers than their African-American counterparts, but often on a regular basis. Many times promoters advertised games as an entertainment venue to attract a broader audience. The Tulsa Black Oilers hosted an event that boasted the addition of a “Big Texas Round-up and Roping Contest,” and urged patrons not to skip seeing “Miss Alice Ray ride the Texas broncos,” all for the single price of admission.⁸¹ During a game between the McAlester Go-Devils and the Oklahoma City Black Indians, with “half the grandstand reserved for white fans,” an “Indians jazz orchestra [entertained fans] between

⁷⁹. Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues, 1869-1960*, 4.

⁸⁰. Note: Both the *Oklahoman* and the *Tulsa Daily World* frequently published positive articles about black ballgames. While metaphors denoting race trickled into articles, many stories and ads simply reported on an athletic event.

⁸¹. “Baseball: Denison Red Snappers,” *Morning Tulsa Daily World*, September 2, 1922.

innings.”⁸² In the late 1940s, several fans integrated the Clearview Rockets’ hometown stands to watch the black nine take on their opponents, not only for a laugh, but also to see a competitive exhibition. Clearview pitcher and former Negro Leaguer Eugene Golden recalls that the Rockets often “had good attendance” and that several whites regularly came out to support Clearview because they lived in the general area of the black town.⁸³ Although separatist conventions prevented the Rockets from playing the nearby Okemah sandlotters a few miles down the road “because the law [and the sheriff] wouldn’t let them,” Clearview often played to the delight of mixed crowds.⁸⁴ Black baseball drew well throughout much of the early twentieth century; many of those teams provided needed respite for residents of all ages and colors.

Baseball became the sport that offered the best opportunities to earn good pay and ascend in status.⁸⁵ Muskogee ballplayer and former Negro Leaguer Porter Reed recalls that athletic ability often opened doors to him that might have otherwise been closed to another African American: “See, back then young men didn’t have cars and [there] wasn’t [anything] to do but play baseball or football, that’s all you could do.”⁸⁶ Sport enabled him and other endowed athletes the opportunity to excel. “If you [were] a good

⁸². "Baseball Tonight: Western League Park."

⁸³. Golden, "Interview with Eugene Golden."

⁸⁴. Ibid.

⁸⁵. Clayborne Carson et al., *African American Lives: The Struggle for Freedom*, vol. 2 (New York, New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), 336; Golden, "Interview with Eugene Golden."; Reed, "Porter Reed Interview."

⁸⁶. Reed, "Porter Reed Interview."

baseball player, you [were] real popular in this town.”⁸⁷ Reed says. “Everybody looked forward to a good football player, a good baseball player, a good basketball player. You stood out in this town, white or black. It didn’t make [a] difference. As long as you [were] a good athlete, you stood out in this town.”⁸⁸ Sports transcended prejudice: “When it come down to that, football or baseball, the race issue was out.”⁸⁹ White or black, as long as they performed well they were popular.

A generation after Muskogee’s derogatory “A La Africaine” article went to press, the town started to subscribe to a more hybridized view of segregation, especially toward talented athletes. Reed recalls that the stands at Muskogee Athletic Park were not technically segregated at the time, but whites still took precedence:

[Seating arrangements] didn’t make [a] difference as long as the whites got them a seat, then you could come up in the grandstand. And then you were there. It just was different when it was athletes. You wasn’t colored on this side or white on that side and some seats over there. . . . It wasn’t [any] issue. We didn’t have no issues in those seats, not at that ballpark.⁹⁰

White folk received seats in the grandstand first, but being an athlete allowed certain freedoms from Jim Crow. The residents of Muskogee came to see high caliber sport in action, regardless of race. “When we had ballgames here. . . . Whites would occupy the grandstand,” says Reed. “They [were] there just like [us] because they wanted to see a good ballgame. And they saw a good ballgame.” Reed recalls that the local white team,

⁸⁷. Ibid.

⁸⁸. Ibid.

⁸⁹. Ibid.

⁹⁰. Ibid.

Muskogee Reds, only drew four or five hundred people for games, but when the Kansas City Monarchs or Memphis Red Sox stormed into town, “people would take off at two o’clock in the day to watch them practice. . . . They had two or three thousand people at the game.”⁹¹

Contrary to Jim Crow regulations in Oklahoma, black athleticism and the thrill of a good game produced possibilities to transcend race. Blacks remained segregated from the white leagues, but played other white teams when the opportunities arose. White teams regularly took to the same field against black teams in spirited contests of wit and athleticism. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, interracial matchups occurred once or twice a year. As early as 1910, the professional Oklahoma City Monarchs battled and handily defeated the white “outlaw” Oklahoma Indians aggregate.⁹² In 1915, the state champion blackballers Tulsa Colts waged a winners-take-all outing against the Tulsa Federals, a game that guaranteed the take of all the gate receipts.⁹³ The Colts fell shy by one run in a low scoring game, but the close score illustrates that the black team refused to concede simply because the opponent was white.⁹⁴

⁹¹. Ibid.

⁹². "Oklahoma Again Beat Indians." Note: Black newspaper *The Freeman*, identified the white baseball Oklahoma Indians as an “outlaw” team, but the intent of the description remains unclear.

⁹³. "Tulsa Federals to Play Negroes," *Tulsa Daily World*, August 4, 1915; "Tulsa Federals to Play Colts," *Tulsa Daily World*, August 5, 1915.

⁹⁴. "Tulsa Federals Defeat Negroes," *Tulsa Daily World*, August 6, 1915.

By the 1930s and 1940s, Negro League teams in Oklahoma like the Guthrie Black Spiders and the Oklahoma City Black Indians often played white sandlot teams and semiprofessional teams. Oklahoma City played various Shawnee teams throughout the 1930s, such as Shawnee Phillips "66" Gassers.⁹⁵ Guthrie Black Spiders' second baseman Walter "Cookie" Chambers recalls, "We played black teams, but sometimes we played white teams if we could book them."⁹⁶ The Black Spiders played many white industrial and business-sponsored teams. Beginning in the early 1940s, the Spiders regularly matched up against the Wilson & Co. Meat Packers, a tradition that carried well into the 1950s.⁹⁷ These recurring matchups against the local white teams attest that interracial competition remained congenial.⁹⁸ Sports columnist Barry Lewis notes that "interracial exhibitions brought whites and blacks together at a time when there was not much

⁹⁵. "Black Indians to Play Last Games," *The Oklahoman*, September 28, 1930; "Shawnee Gassers Blank Negro Team," *The Oklahoman*, June 11, 1937. Note: The two listed articles against Shawnee teams can be presumed that the games were interracial competitions because white newspapers prefaced if a team was "Negro" or "colored" as to inform the reader of race. Neither the Shawnee Broncos of 1930 nor the "66" Gassers articles list any indication that the opposing teams were black.

⁹⁶. Walter "Cookie" Chambers. Interviewed by Charles Doolittle et al. Interview of Walter "Cookie" Chambers. Guthrie, Oklahoma, October 3.

⁹⁷. "Boomers Are Packers' Foe," *The Oklahoman*, July 2, 1941; "Boomers Snuff Out Barbour Threat, 6-4," *The Oklahoman*, July 10, 1941; "Guthrie Negroes Play Here Friday," *The Oklahoman*, July 8, 1941; "Packers Trim Negroes, 11-1," *The Oklahoman*, July 12, 1941; "Wilson Packers and Guthrie Team Tie," *The Oklahoman*, June 30, 1941; "Packers Poison Spiders, 17 to 3," *The Oklahoman*, August 6, 1946; "Spiders Bite Packers, 7-5," *The Oklahoman*, July 16, 1946; "Guthrie Has Benefit for Perkins Family."; "Gassers, Truckers Vie Tonight at Legion," *The Oklahoman*, June 25, 1952; "Truckers' Sloan Collects Six Hits," *The Oklahoman*, June 26, 1953.

⁹⁸. Note: From 1910 to 1962, Oklahoma Negro League teams often assumed the field against white ballclubs.

interaction between the races, especially in cities such as Tulsa.”⁹⁹ When the two races met on baseball fields, tiny episodes of equality played out between the basepaths.

Admittedly, life for Negro Leaguers on the road was far less accommodating or welcoming to the dark complexioned visitors when they rolled into town. While many of the former ballplayers recall their past experiences with warm feelings, there were a few game destinations where people openly flaunted bigotry. When Porter Reed traveled with the Muskogee Hustlers (later named Muskogee Cardinals) to nearby Arkansas, he recounts how spectators called him everything but his name: “My name is Porter Reed. That’s my name. But I wasn’t Porter Reed when I went to Arkansas. I was nigger.”¹⁰⁰ Many Arkansans spouted racial epithets as easily as saying their fathers’ names. Eugene Golden says that during a road trip in 1947 to Rogers and Siloam Springs, a young boy in Rogers, no more than five or six years old, pointed to Clearview old-timer Whitson Weaver who often traveled with the Rockets. The child tugged on his father’s pant leg and motioned toward Weaver exclaiming, “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, that is a old nigger there! He’s older than Abraham Lincoln!”¹⁰¹ Their backwoods mentality corrupted rational thinking and negatively influenced impressionable children. Says Golden,

⁹⁹. Barry Lewis, "1973 Old Timers Game at Oiler Park Was Unique Treat," *Tulsa World*, July 4, 2010.

¹⁰⁰. Porter Reed. Interviewed by Mary Larson. Oral history interview with Porter Reed.

¹⁰¹. Golden, "Interview with Eugene Golden."

“Those little kids, they would talk just like you was an animal. They wouldn’t think that you could understand what they was saying.”¹⁰²

When the Rockets traveled to Arkansas to play the white Georgia Crackers, many white patrons came to watch the game, some hanging from treetops. According to Golden, the reason why spectators flooded the stadium was not entirely to watch a baseball game, but actually because many of them “had never seen a black person before.”¹⁰³ For locals to pack into a ballpark or hang from treetops outside a baseball game because they had never seen a black person before harkens back to the era when Congolese native Ota Benga sat years in captivity and on display as an exotic oddity after the St. Louis World’s Fair of 1904.¹⁰⁴ Just as Ota Benga served to satiate the white majority’s curiosities about “racial exoticism,” many black baseball players served a similar role at the regional level. Ironically though, despite black ballplayers playing up their roles as acrobatic exhibitionists and pantomiming jesters, it was actually the Arkansans that exhibited “primitive” qualities during the exhibitions, not the traveling Negro Leaguers. Even though Reed and Golden experienced ill feelings from residents in Arkansas, they acknowledge that plenty of prejudice happened at home in Oklahoma.

Despite athletic successes, discrimination continued throughout Oklahoma from the 1930s well into the 1950s. In Bartlesville, where Walter “Cookie” Chambers grew up, many townspeople accepted prejudiced traditions that “had been handed down” to

¹⁰². Ibid.

¹⁰³. Ibid.

¹⁰⁴. Pamela Newkirk, *Spectacle: The Astonishing Life of Ota Benga* (New York, New York: Amistad, 2015); Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume, *Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo* (New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

them over generations.¹⁰⁵ Although Chambers' hometown subscribed to Jim Crow and race-based exclusion, he occasionally interacted with white children his age. Cookie remembers when he was a boy how town folk allowed black youngsters to practice baseball with the local white kids, and even condoned them traveling together, but he emphasizes that playing on a team with them was off limits. Cookie recalls that in Bartlesville: "Everything was always segregated downtown." "Blacks couldn't get service jobs," says Chambers. "They were struck shining shoes or selling newspapers on the corner or sweeping the barber shop." A few restaurants served blacks, but only from the back door. Chambers remembers, "They used to have places a man could go in the back of the café and get you a stack [of pancakes] and some sausages and eggs. Only in the back door, *don't come in the front!*"¹⁰⁶ Doing so would violate Jim Crow protocol and likely would cause, at the very least, confrontation.

Echoing Cookie Chambers' experiences, the *Oklahoma Eagle* editor Ed Goodwin emphatically declares that segregation and racist policies in Oklahoma prior to integration "was a bitch!"¹⁰⁷ According to Goodwin, some of the same towns where the Tulsa T-Town Clowns competed openly flaunted their bigotry. He vividly recalls seeing "sundown" signs in rural towns that instructed African Americans traveling through to go a different way because they were not welcome.¹⁰⁸ He also notes that, although

¹⁰⁵. Chambers, "Interview of Walter "Cookie" Chambers."

¹⁰⁶. Ibid.

¹⁰⁷. Goodwin, "Interview with Ed Goodwin, Jr.."

¹⁰⁸. Ibid. Note: Sundown towns are places where white residents openly exhibit racist behaviors and post threatening signs designed to purposely exclude people of other

Muskogee has a sizable black population, sundown signs at the city's limits read: "If you can read this, nigger, you better leave. If you can't read, you better leave anyway."¹⁰⁹ In Vinita, where the T-Town Clowns occasionally played ballgames, a roadside restaurant advertisement boasted that they sold "Nigger Chicken" at the Grand Café.¹¹⁰ Although these towns viewed blacks as lesser citizens, they still allowed kids to play together and teams to compete. Oklahoma clearly suffered from cultural schizophrenia.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century in Oklahoma, black players understood that their place within the societal hierarchical order often meant having to let a white team win during interracial competition. Extenuating circumstances outside the field of play occasionally affected the outcome of ballgames, like the overarching and ominous presence of racist fans or white players threatening black players if they dared to try to win. Eugene Golden distinctly recalls that the Clearview Rockets battled hard against an Arkansas white team, but inevitably conceded defeat for they knew they would

faces. Most "cautionary" signs were posted at city or town limits and often worded in inflammatory language directed at blacks to "not let the sun go down on them" while passing through. To avoid sundown towns or other altercations while traveling, many African-American motorists had to know places of respite ahead of time. For those travelers who embarked on their journeys without local connections, they could consult publications that printed friendly places that provided services to blacks. Most notably was the *Negro Motorist Green Book* that outlined many safe places in cities in several states.

¹⁰⁹. Goodwin, "Interview with Ed Goodwin, Jr.." Note: No sources have yet to surface indicating that Muskogee had such an inflammatory sign at their city limits, but Goodwin emphatically declares that the city openly flaunted their Jim Crow ways.

¹¹⁰. Ibid.; Library of Congress, "Grand Cafe Eat 'Nigger Chicken' Vinita," (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2015).

have been run out of town, or worse.¹¹¹ Golden admits that he played on few teams that he knew outranked their Caucasian opponents, but often relented as a measure of self-preservation.¹¹² None was more evident than when the Clearview Rockets traveled on road trips through Arkansas. Golden remembers that their role in a few games was to perform competitively, but inevitably they had to let the white team win, regardless of their ability to score. Although Golden is light complexioned and could pass for white or Native American, he chose to live and play as a black man. He affirms his choice: “If they don’t want me, I don’t want them.”¹¹³

Long before integration permeated the professional major leagues in the 1940s and the minor leagues in the 1950s, African-American ballclubs in Oklahoma joined with other black teams in nearby states to form their own baseball leagues. Cultural sports academic Benjamin Rader notes that across the country many white ball teams and club owners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suffered from a serious case of Negrophobia, thereby forcing black ballplayers to organize and “carve out a separate sphere for themselves.”¹¹⁴ From the beginning of the territorial settlements and throughout the first half of the twentieth century, black ballplayers immersed themselves in various “Colored Baseball Leagues.”¹¹⁵ Although the term “Negro Leagues”

¹¹¹. Golden, "Interview with Eugene Golden."

¹¹². Ibid.

¹¹³. Ibid.

¹¹⁴. Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports*, 6th ed. (Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2009), 63.

¹¹⁵. Carson et al., *African American Lives: The Struggle for Freedom*, 336.

predominantly refers to the federation that Rube Foster inaugurated in 1920, other leagues existed before, during, and after Foster's reign. Occasionally those organizations thrived; many times they failed.¹¹⁶ As early as 1910 and as late as 1949, several ballclubs played in the assorted incarnations of the Texas or Oklahoma Colored League.¹¹⁷ Three years after statehood, the Oklahoma City Monarchs played professional baseball in the Colored Texas League. In 1910, the capital city Monarchs clinched the league championship against robust clubs like Rube Foster's Leland Giants and "Topeka" Jack Johnson's Kansas City Royal Giants.¹¹⁸ Oklahoma City, Tulsa, and Muskogee all applied to join the Texas Negro Baseball League in the fall of 1922, but by Opening Day 1923, only Tulsa represented Oklahoma in the Texas Colored League.¹¹⁹ Several times, Oklahoma Negro leaguers played the majority of their games against teams from Texas,

¹¹⁶. "National Negro Base Ball Association Is Formed," *Tulsa Star*, February 28, 1920; Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*, viii; Fink, "Semi-professional African American Baseball in Texas before the Great Depression," 224.

¹¹⁷. "Monarchs Beat Fort Worthians," *The Oklahoman*, July 10, 1910; "Texas Base Ball Men Hold Meeting," *Dallas Express*, September 23, 1922; "Texas Colored League Opens Today," *Dallas Express*, May 5, 1923; "Negro Nines Get Up State League," *The Oklahoman*, April 19, 1936; "Oklahoma City Enters Organized Loop," *The Oklahoman*, April 14, 1949.

¹¹⁸. "Kansas City Giants Ready to Win Pennant," *Freeman*, February 2, 1910; "Chateau Garden Notes."

¹¹⁹. "Texas Base Ball Men Hold Meeting."; "Texas Colored League Opens Today."

Kansas, and Missouri. League participation continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s; one league even established headquarters in Muskogee.¹²⁰

While many black teams in Oklahoma were coined “semiprofessional,” the athletes competed with the same big league ferocity. Regional teams like the Guthrie Black Spiders and the Tulsa T-Town Clowns in the 1940s and 1950s, were classified as minor league or semiprofessional, but were aggressive on the ballfield. The Center for Negro League Baseball Research accounts that “virtually every area of the country had its own Negro League. Often these were considered the ‘Minor’ leagues, but in truth they played very competitive baseball.”¹²¹ Oklahoma African American historian Currie Ballard attests that although teams in the professional Negro League usually receive the most praise for their role in organizing black baseball before integration, local teams such as the Black Spiders or the T-Town Clowns “played a minor role in the old Negro National League.”¹²² Oklahoma City sportswriter Berry Tramel echoes Ballard’s sentiment, “The Guthrie Black Spiders don’t have the lush history of the Homestead Grays or the Birmingham Black Barons. But such storied franchises were only a small part of Negro baseball. Every region had a league.”¹²³ Many players on Oklahoma

¹²⁰. "Negro Nines Get Up State League."; "Oklahoma City Enters Organized Loop."

¹²¹. Center for Negro League Baseball Research, "Defining Negro League Baseball".

¹²². Currie Ballard, "Preserving Oklahoma History: Black League Baseball," (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Oklahoma Educational Television Authority, 2011).

¹²³. Berry Tramel, "Blacks Relive Glory Days at Reunion," *The Oklahoman*, June 21, 2004.

Negro League teams either went on to play in the black majors or had formerly played pro ball.¹²⁴ The presence of such athletes made for exciting games and provided the opportunity to watch jaw-dropping plays on a regular basis.

Establishing separate leagues during segregation helped fulfill a void in African-American communities, yet many times running an independent baseball team within a fledgling league became an effort to sustain financially. Rob Fink observes that those separate leagues, much like the Texas Colored and the Texas-Oklahoma-Louisiana (T-O-L) Leagues, succeeded and failed due to varying factors.¹²⁵ The delicate balance between success and failure teetered on drawing fans and meeting travel expenses. Fink notes, "The main problems for black baseball centered on sporadic game attendance. . . . While these fluctuating attendance numbers might not hurt the individual black semi-professional teams that much, they proved deadly to an ill-prepared league."¹²⁶ He continues, "Numerous semi-professional teams appeared, thrived, fell on hard times, and disappeared, mirroring the peaks and valleys that occurred in professional black baseball."¹²⁷ To combat low attendance, a measure often employed to draw fans to black

¹²⁴. "Black Panthers Put Whitewash on Black Oilers in Opener," *Morning Tulsa Daily World*, July 29, 1922; "Black Oilers Open Against Dallas Today," *Tulsa World*, May 2, 1929; Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."; Reed, "Porter Reed Interview."; Golden, "Interview with Eugene Golden."; Dixon and Hannigan, *The Negro Baseball Leagues: A Photographic History*; Dixon, "; "The Kansas City Monarchs in Our Home Town."

¹²⁵. Fink, *Playing in Shadows: Texas and Negro League Baseball*.

¹²⁶. Fink, "Semi-professional African American Baseball in Texas before the Great Depression," 224.

¹²⁷. *Ibid.*, 220.

baseball games involved actively advertising shadowball routines, lighthearted play, and comical banter.¹²⁸

On-field theatrics worked to attract people to the park; unsurprisingly, shadowball and other histrionic forms of play became a Negro Leaguer's trademark. As widespread integration loomed in the late 1940s and early 1950s, baseball historian Neil Lanctot asserts, "For all-black teams, athletic talent was no longer enough to survive, and comedy provided an additional selling point."¹²⁹ Players in the colored leagues across the country certainly showboated and played shadowball to the applause of both black and white fans. Sports academic Rob Ruck contends that if a black team played a white team and won, comedy and minstrel show frivolities would offset the tension or boredom of the "lesser race" winning the baseball contest. Says Ruck, "Black teams . . . sought creative ways of entertaining audiences who might otherwise lose interest when their team was beaten by a black opponent. At times, their performance—cakewalking along the base paths, pantomiming play during infield practice—reinforced minstrel show stereotypes."¹³⁰ Eugene Golden recalls that there "was a certain amount of clowns in

¹²⁸. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."; Golden, "Interview with Eugene Golden."; "Benefit Game for Peacock."; "Joplin All-Stars to Play T-Town Clowns Tonight," *Joplin Globe (Missouri)*, August 14, 1955. Note: Shadowball was on overtly dramatized a juggling-type pantomime routine that consisted of throwing an imaginary ball around the field.

¹²⁹. Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*, 371.

¹³⁰. Ruck, *Raceball: How the Major Leagues Colonized the Black and Latin Game*, 22. Note: Cakewalking was an over-embellished and improvisational form of dance originating in the late nineteenth century. Men and women pranced around and marched back and forth with no particular symmetry. Men often walked about with jelly-

about all the teams” and that lighthearted, frivolous play “was a drawing card” to appeal to a larger fan base.¹³¹ According to Golden, Clearview’s first baseman Willie Black occasionally played his position from a rocking chair.¹³² Guthrie Black Spider Curly Harper pretended to be a crippled player until he got on base, but once in position, he dropped the act and stole bases on the opposition.¹³³ According to Currie Ballard, the Spiders certainly joked about the field, but their talents surpassed grandstanding: “Besides being the most colorful bunch ever to play at [Guthrie’s Jelsma Stadium], the Negroes are also tops on the field.”¹³⁴ Although tomfoolery occurred during ball games, minstrel-esque black antics only represented a small portion of black baseball in Oklahoma.

As the Great Depression lingered into the late 1930s and an impending world war brewed in Europe, the territorial capital city Guthrie Black Spiders began to forge a reputation around the Oklahoma region as a reckonable force on the ballfield.¹³⁵ Sources

legs, wobbling and gyrating about where they danced. Negro league teams embraced this style of entertainment during the banner years of the Negro Leagues. White performers such as Al Schacht and Max Patkin adopted cakewalking as part of their entertainment routine. Patkin actually incorporated baseball signs into his flailing about when he coached from the sidelines during baseball games.

¹³¹. Golden, "Interview with Eugene Golden."

¹³². Ibid.

¹³³. Ballard, "Preserving Oklahoma History: Black League Baseball."

¹³⁴. Ibid.

¹³⁵. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."; Golden, "Interview with Eugene Golden."

indicate that the Spiders' tenure as a semiprofessional team stretched from 1938 to 1953.¹³⁶ During the Spiders early days, the struggles of the Depression still tangled and consumed people in the suffocating effects of a country down on its luck, but baseball remained an important part of life.¹³⁷ Although, attendance definitely plummeted as people had to prioritize what little money they had to spend.¹³⁸ Those fans fortunate enough to spare the expense for ballpark admission could leave their troubles at the turnstiles and temporarily forget about defaulted mortgages, sparse cupboards and pantries, starving livestock, and dark clouds of dust as they watched a scorcher of a team burn up the basepaths and whittle down opposition with heavy-hitting lumber.

Blackball organizers also struggled and juggled the chores of making enough money to meet operating expenses.¹³⁹ The *Black Dispatch* in Oklahoma City proclaimed that fielding a team during the Depression was one of sports biggest gambles.¹⁴⁰ Despite the uncertainty of the future and fragile economy, a few entrepreneurs wagered their bets

¹³⁶. Ballard, "Preserving Oklahoma History: Black League Baseball."; "Truckers' Sloan Collects Six Hits."; "Wrens Down Guthrie on Jenkins' Hit, 4-2," *The Oklahoman*, June 20, 1953; "Wrens Visit Guthrie," *The Oklahoman*, July 3, 1953.

¹³⁷. Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*, 9; Burke et al., *Glory Days of Summer: The History of Baseball in Oklahoma*, 259.

¹³⁸. Fink, *Playing in Shadows: Texas and Negro League Baseball*, 88; Burke et al., *Glory Days of Summer: The History of Baseball in Oklahoma*, 259.

¹³⁹. Burke et al., *Glory Days of Summer: The History of Baseball in Oklahoma*, 260; Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*, 9.

¹⁴⁰. Burke et al., *Glory Days of Summer: The History of Baseball in Oklahoma*, 260.

on baseball.¹⁴¹ Resourceful Guthrie black businessman Sammie Simms owned the local Chicken Inn, a “homespun juke-joint” that fed and entertained many residents of the city, but he also dabbled in other business ventures.¹⁴² Spreading his money around made sense as to not have all of his “chicken shack” eggs in one basket; he set his eyes on baseball.

Simms spied a blue-jeans-and-t-shirt bunch of sandlotters playing fast-paced baseball outside of town. He approached the group and convinced them to come into town to play many of their home games at the sandstone palace lovingly referred to as “The Rock,” Jelsma Field.¹⁴³ Simms remembers bringing the ragamuffins into Guthrie and making them presentable to paying customers: “[The condition of the team] was in bad shape. It was all right for where they was playing because they was playing out in the country. So, to bring [them] to town, the first place to play [was the stadium] where they would draw people. They had to have suits.”¹⁴⁴ Currie Ballard notes that Sam Simms was a man of means who made do with what was available for his start-up venture. Says Ballard, “Use what you got till you get what you need.”¹⁴⁵ The Guthrie proprietor tapped into the talents of a local seamstress to sew up some uniforms, but there

¹⁴¹. Ibid.; Ballard, "Preserving Oklahoma History: Black League Baseball."

¹⁴². Tramel, "Blacks Relive Glory Days at Reunion."

¹⁴³. Ballard, "Preserving Oklahoma History: Black League Baseball."; Jason Kersey, "Why Guthrie's Jelsma Stadium is the Oklahoma City Area's Best High School Football Venue," *NewsOK*, November 2, 2011.

¹⁴⁴. Ballard, "Preserving Oklahoma History: Black League Baseball."

¹⁴⁵. Ibid.

was a unique twist. Sammie Simms said, “What I’ll do, it might sound bad, but it’s better than no suits. I’ll get the yards of cotton sacks . . . and then we’ll dye them black. Then the name, I’ll name you all the Guthrie Black Spiders.”¹⁴⁶ With a little bit of Depression-era innovation, the cotton-sack uniforms solved the blue jean and t-shirt problem, thus establishing a professional-looking lineup.

With a roster established, Simms constantly sought talent across the state and throughout the region to enhance his team’s abilities to win. Said one Guthrie resident, “He would go to different towns and get players. He’d go to Wichita, and Ponca City, Arkansas, and Oklahoma City, Clinton. . . . Everywhere he could find a good player, Sammie would go get him.”¹⁴⁷ The Guthrie owner often wooed players away from Langston University to enhance his highly competitive ballclub. Simms recruited Walter “Cookie” Chambers away from the Langston baseball team to play second base for Guthrie.¹⁴⁸ When Chambers agreed, Simms furnished him a place to live at his boarding house and provided Cookie with a job during off days.¹⁴⁹ During his time with the Spiders, Chambers developed a respected status for his exceptional talent as a ballplayer on one of Oklahoma’s best black ball teams.¹⁵⁰

^{146.} Ibid.

^{147.} Ibid.

^{148.} Chambers, "Interview of Walter "Cookie" Chambers."; Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."

^{149.} Chambers, "Interview of Walter "Cookie" Chambers."

^{150.} Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."; Owens, "Interview with Ted Owens."

Nearly every semiprofessional baseballer in Oklahoma earned a wage to play the game. Ballard notes that the Spiders received pay from gate receipts, but “played mainly for the fun of the sport.”¹⁵¹ Both Eugene Golden and T-Town Clowns infielder Sylvester Nichols remember the teams receiving a 60/40 split, taking home forty percent of the gate when they traveled to away games.¹⁵² “The most I ever made was ninety dollars a week.” say Golden.¹⁵³ But considering that he previously worked for a dollar a day, “that was big money.”¹⁵⁴ Berry Tramel confirms that several Oklahoma Negro Leaguers were pay-to-play athletes.¹⁵⁵ Tramel attended the first annual Oklahoma Black Baseball Reunion in 2004 where he interviewed and observed several surviving members who played in the Oklahoma Negro Leagues and abroad. He reported, “Frank Luster, who played for the Guthrie Black Spiders while attending Langston, said he got \$8 a game unless he pitched. Then it was \$10.”¹⁵⁶ Sylvester Nichols remembers getting paid about three hundred dollars a month during the season; Tulsa pitchers “got twenty dollars extra” for their rigors on the mound, “if they won.”¹⁵⁷ Semiprofessional black baseball was most

¹⁵¹. Ballard, "Preserving Oklahoma History: Black League Baseball."

¹⁵². Golden, "Interview with Eugene Golden."; Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."

¹⁵³. Golden, "Interview with Eugene Golden."

¹⁵⁴. Ibid.

¹⁵⁵. Tramel, "Blacks Relive Glory Days at Reunion."

¹⁵⁶. Ibid.

¹⁵⁷. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."

certainly professional ball, and in many ways those athletes worked harder and for less money than their fulltime counterparts.

Shifting ideologies and evolving postwar perspectives toward blacks accelerated desegregation, and as a byproduct also opened a Pandora's Box of progress that would soon lead to the demise of the black leagues. By the 1940s, when the United States joined the Allied Forces against belligerents in Europe and in the Pacific, African Americans became a large part of the war effort, both at home and abroad. Risking life and limb, for a country that chose to exclude them, empowered many African Americans to speak up for equality. Black soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen felt that their contribution to the nation's security was worth more than segregated water fountains, back door food shaming, and "separate but equal" policies.

Journalist Scott Simon notes that by the mid 1940s, "editorial writers and civic leaders already clamored for America to integrate the armed forces, which had just won the world's liberty."¹⁵⁸ Simon illustrates, as changing mindsets softened towards people of color, questions of the time began to switch from antiquated notions of "Why is a black person allowed to sit in the same stands as whites?" to more contemplative rationalizations like "How could a young man who might be called up to risk his life backing up Pee Wee Reese in Guam, or Yogi Berra in Normandy, not be allowed to earn a living alongside them on the same playing field?"¹⁵⁹ According to journalism professor Chris Lamb, during this time period a few white columnists of the war era like Joe Bostic

¹⁵⁸. Scott Simon, *Jackie Robinson and the Integration of Baseball*, Turning Points (J Wiley & Sons, 2002), 5.

¹⁵⁹. Ibid.

and Joe Cumiskey queried why there had not been a matchup of the champions in the major and Negro leagues. Cumiskey chided that such an event would rip away the “barrier that has been keeping Negro stars out of organized baseball.”¹⁶⁰ When blacks came home from the war and women returned home from their riveting positions, they began to voice their desire for greater equality in society. Reflecting the growing sentiment of peoples and periodicals across the country, a black publication in Tulsa, the *Oklahoma Eagle*, regularly lamented that the time was appropriate to give black men a chance to tryout for major league clubs; if they could compete on the battlefield, they were qualified to field, hit, and run on the basepaths.

As the flames of progress ignited the fires of advancement for blacks to play professional baseball, there was no event more important than a black man signing a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers organization in late summer 1945.¹⁶¹ At the tail end of the World War II, the Dodgers’ bushy-browed general manager Branch Rickey recruited the All-American athlete and Army veteran Jack Roosevelt Robinson with hopes for him to break the color barrier in baseball. When Robinson crossed the chalk at Ebbets Field in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, New York on April 15, 1947, the baseball world forever changed. Jackie Robinson was the sparkplug that Rickey had hoped for. He brought his scrappy Negro League style of play with him to the majors, playing “small ball” to the dismay of his opponents—utilizing the hit and run, bunting,

¹⁶⁰. Chris Lamb, *Conspiracy of Silence: Sportswriters and the Long Campaign to Desegregate Baseball* (University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

¹⁶¹. Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*; Simon, *Jackie Robinson and the Integration of Baseball*.

stealing, and playing aggressively on the field. Gradually, black and white press coverage switched from local happenings and Negro League updates, to Jackie-centric articles depicting his ascent in the big leagues.¹⁶² He became the patron saint for African Americans because they saw their struggles embodied in his fiery demeanor on the field and gentile silence in society. For black America, when Robinson donned his now-sacred number 42, he carried his entire race on his back.

In many ways integration terminally infected the black baseball institution, but it did so at a gradual pace. All the while, the change also led to the disintegration of the black enterprise because African Americans could now freely spend their money outside of their communities.¹⁶³ Progress and advancement for minorities brought with it a backhanded disease that mimicked a slow-growing cancer that continued to metastasize up into the 1960s. Integration occurred throughout the ranks of professional baseball over a span of several years when the Boston Red Sox finally integrated with Oklahoma-born Pumpsie Green in 1959.¹⁶⁴ Rob Ruck notes, “Baseball’s integration was also a curse. . . . [It] symbolized social democratization, but desegregation came with heavy

¹⁶². "The Threats and Jeers Have Turned to Cheers," *Oklahoma Eagle (Tulsa)*, July 7, 1949; "Watch Your Favorite Baseball Stars on T-V from Ellis," *Oklahoma Eagle*, September 25, 1952.

¹⁶³. Amanda K. Coleman, "A Socioeconomic Analysis of the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma: 1940-1980" (Oklahoma State University, 1999), 2.

¹⁶⁴. Baseball-Reference.com, "Pumpsie Green", Baseball-Reference.com (2015); John Thorn, "Baseball Integration Timeline," in *Our Game*, ed. John Thorn (Cooperstown, New York: Major League Baseball, 2015).

costs for the black community.”¹⁶⁵ Neil Lanctot observes that most African Americans during this shift “viewed any movement toward complete integration as more important than the preservation and/or development of race-based institutions.”¹⁶⁶ Oklahoma City integrated when Bill Greason toed the rubber to pitch for the minor league Indians in 1952, six years after Jackie Robinson broke into the big leagues.¹⁶⁷ One year later, Charles Harmon joined the Tulsa Oilers’ roster.¹⁶⁸

By the mid 1950s, black baseball faded in popularity; as a new decade approached, declining attendance and lack of loyalty left African-American independent baseball gasping for air.¹⁶⁹ Both black and white newspapers’ coverage of local blackball also dwindled. Rob Fink notes, “As fan support shifted away from African American baseball, so did press coverage. The black newspapers continued to write of the exploits of black major leaguers, while ignoring the all-black teams.”¹⁷⁰ Radio, television, air conditioning allowed fans of any color the opportunity to listen and watch black

¹⁶⁵. Ruck, *Raceball: How the Major Leagues Colonized the Black and Latin Game*, 100-101.

¹⁶⁶. Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*, 364.

¹⁶⁷. "O. C. Pitcher Beats Sports," *The Oklahoman*, August 7, 1952.

¹⁶⁸. "Harmon Will Play in Oilers' Opener, Schultz."

¹⁶⁹. "Negro Decline Seen in Baseball," *The Oklahoman*, June 14, 1963.

¹⁷⁰. Fink, "Semi-professional African American Baseball in Texas before the Great Depression," 227.

ballplayers comfortably in the confines of their homes.¹⁷¹ African-American fans shifted their loyalties to the few black players who won spots on major league teams. A black man playing on a previously-segregated ball team represented a beacon for hope for greater equality in the future. Eugene Golden recalls that after integration permeated both the major and minor leagues, the Negro Leagues—both National and regional—fell from popularity and eventually disappeared. “When it finally opened up,” Golden says, “boy, I mean it killed the black league.”¹⁷² According to Golden, by 1954, the separate league in Oklahoma was “done. Fully done. They had teams, but they couldn’t play; all of your best players, they went up and got big contracts.”¹⁷³ Jackie Robinson rang the death knell with a big league crack of the bat.

Black leagues slowly withered in the ever-expanding wilderness during the mass exodus to the major league promised land. The once “steady” league organizations like the Negro National League and Negro American League, transcended from fledgling start-ups to that of acclaim and notoriety, only to be undermined by the desegregation of white baseball. Neil Lanctot dissects the demise of the one-time “million dollar league,” and how the Negro Leagues went from a failing venture to one of great success, only to die at the hands of progress.¹⁷⁴ Lanctot declares that desegregation became the pivotal

¹⁷¹. “Watch Your Favorite Baseball Stars on T-V from Ellis,” *Oklahoma Eagle*, September 25, 1952.

¹⁷². Golden, “Interview with Eugene Golden.”

¹⁷³. Ibid.

¹⁷⁴. Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*, 118.

moment when the league went from an organization on the rise to that of a business spiraling into ruin. He illustrates how integration catalyzed national progress and how the mechanism lured fans away from the formerly economically-viable black leagues. Integration accelerated those shifting loyalties because radio, television, and air conditioning allowed fans to follow their favorite major leaguers from home.¹⁷⁵ Five years after Jackie Robinson integrated the big leagues, Oklahoma began integrating the minor league ballclubs with former Negro Leaguers and new, raw-talent black ballplayers—the move that inevitably made obsolete the local black leagues.¹⁷⁶

As black ballclubs faded from popularity, so did black businesses. Desegregation unlocked the social shackles placed upon African Americans, and, according to geographer Amanda Coleman, blacks decided to broaden where they wanted to spend their money.¹⁷⁷ Lancot asserts that no matter how buoyant the league might have been prior to integration, “black teams could not hope to compete with the enormous symbolic appeal of Jackie Robinson and the handful of other black players now appearing in the major leagues.”¹⁷⁸ Negro League team owners had hoped for an expansion to the major leagues, but that never occurred. Antitrust laws established fifty years prior prevented

¹⁷⁵. "Watch Your Favorite Baseball Stars on T-V from Ellis."

¹⁷⁶. "O. C. Pitcher Beats Sports."; "Harmon Will Play in Oilers' Opener, Schultz."; "Negro Decline Seen in Baseball."; McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma*; Burke et al., *Glory Days of Summer: The History of Baseball in Oklahoma*.

¹⁷⁷. Coleman, "A Socioeconomic Analysis of the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma: 1940-1980", 2.

¹⁷⁸. Lancot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*, x.

any league from competing with the major league ballclubs, thereby granting them the right to be an exclusive monopoly.¹⁷⁹

Progress continued after integration, but rigid discrimination practices still lingered in Oklahoma in the 1950s. The thorns of prejudice continued its painful prick in old familiar ways. After his days playing with the Guthrie Black Spiders, Cookie Chambers joined an American Legion ball team, the Guthrie Merchants, and he occasionally traveled with the team to play in city tournaments. During a trip to a tournament in Cushing, the host town denied Chambers the opportunity to play. Merchants' manager George Wilson "didn't know no race" and brought Chambers along because of his athletic abilities to help the Merchants win.¹⁸⁰ The Guthrie team boarded the caravan to go to Cushing, but Cookie reluctantly resigned to the position of benchwarmer for the entire series. "I did not play in that whole tournament," recalls Chambers. "They carried me over, but I had to sit on the bench."¹⁸¹ Not all of Oklahoma subscribed to integrated ballclubs, but gradually by the late 1940s, the burdens of conservative Jim Crow mindsets slowly became less audacious and constrictive.

The tragedy of 1948 that surrounded the death of "Chatter" Jack Perkins illustrates the changing perceptions of race during the late 1940s, and how the Second World War likely influenced those perceptions. Several *Oklahoman* articles, over a

¹⁷⁹. Stuart Banner, "Why is Baseball Exempt from Antitrust Law?," in *OUPblog* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁸⁰. Chambers, "Interview of Walter "Cookie" Chambers."

¹⁸¹. *Ibid.*

period of two weeks, recounted Jack Perkins' life and the surrounding efforts of ball teams and businesses that sought to insure money benefited his wife and daughter. The Oklahoma City paper never mentioned the black ballplayer's name, and the only other indicator of race was the Guthrie Black Spiders' name. In those moments, a white newspaper wrote about a white player who died from a pitch thrown by a pitcher, an athlete, a man, who only happened to be black. That was the extent of the story, and the absence of race reveals telling signs about changing perceptions of race in Oklahoma. Racism was not dead by any shape of the word; Cookie Chambers' benchwarming experience revealed the contrary.

Baseball eased racial tension over a period of time, most noticeably after the First World War. Whenever a black team competed against a white team, they challenged the racial caste system to include them and acknowledge their talents. When white fans attended a Negro League game, they witnessed the athletic prowess of baseball players who equaled, and even exceeded, the talents of their white counterparts. Perhaps, during the first few decades of the twentieth century white fans often ventured out to see the exhibition to pique their curiosities and intrigue. Jim Crow derogatory sentiments certainly existed across the state, and it still continues in some regards. But by the 1920s and 1930s, Negro League baseball, both on the national and regional levels, began to grow in popularity through newspaper coverage.

Oklahoma endured a race riot, lynchings, and other friction-causing events because of racial animosity. Conservative opinions and policies intentionally segregated the state, which included many baseball parks. Despite the animosity that many people harbored toward African Americans, black baseball players used their athletic abilities to

transcend the racial barriers that often held them back in society. In some ways, the shadowball routines and rocking-chair antics served as an icebreaker to showcase the exceptional talents that many of the players commanded. Blacks and whites discovered a unity between the baselines where white opponents accepted blackballers for those talents. Oklahoma residents over the past century have both rebelled against and embraced African-American ballplayers. In brief moments on the baseball field, the black and white men of Mudville often achieved diplomacy between the baselines in a grass-and-dirt democracy.¹⁸² A closer look at Tulsa during baseball's Golden Era further illustrates the complexities of race and sport in Oklahoma, and shows how black ballclubs served a vital role for African Americans through times of tragedy and of triumph. In reality, many times harmony between blacks and whites was an unspoken conditional contract that flexed as long as whites largely maintained their "racial superiority" over the residents from the north side of the tracks. With segregation firmly in place in the Oil Capital, black gold and black ball coincided during Tulsa's "Gilded Era."

¹⁸². Note: "Mudville" is a term used by many enthusiasts to indicate a non-descript hometown team, ballpark, or location. "Mudville" entered modern baseball lexicon after it appeared in the famous nineteenth century poem, "Casey at the Bat."

CHAPTER III

BLACK GOLD IN OIL TOWN: TULSA'S BLACKBALL IN A GILDED ERA, 1913 TO 1953

“We had a million dollar infield. We didn’t miss nothin’.”¹⁸³

—Sylvester Nichols, July 9, 2013

On a sultry Tulsa summer night, former T-Town Clown second baseman Sylvester Nichols sits in the stands on the first base side of ONEOK Field and watches a visiting batter take his cuts. Now a nonagenarian at ninety years old, “Nick” Nichols reclines in the shadows of the downtown landscape and studies how the infielders ready themselves in anticipation of where the hitter may put the ball in play. He spies bits of perfection as a shortstop cleanly fields a hot grounder and relays to second for the force out in the beginning of a 6-4-3 double play. Nick applauds the graceful fluidity that these young men display. For nine innings, he lives in each moment: from the on deck circle to

¹⁸³. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."; Rogosin, *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues*, 24-25. Note: Nichols’ reference to a “million dollar infield” originated in the 1930s with the Newark Eagles. Donn Rogosin notes, that if Newark infielders Willie Wells, Ray Dandridge, Dick Seay, and Mule Suttles had been white players, they would have been worth a combined million dollars. Nichols’ claim infers that his team sported a high-caliber infield, which he believed was also worthy of the title.

the at-bat, from the called third strike to an effortless throw from deep centerfield that ends in a bang-bang play at home. Even in the winter years of his life, he still stokes the tinderbox for the love of the game. As Sylvester Nichols observes the Tulsa Drillers, he flashes back to the late 1940s, to that “Golden Era” when baseball reigned as the national pastime.

Sitting there in his aisle seat as he sips on a cold soda pop, Sylvester has double vision. Today it is 2013, but it is also 1946. Nichols remembers it all: the table-dropping curveballs, the dust-flying slides into second, the shadowballing, the cheers of both black and white fans, and the late night road trips home only to turn around to work a fulltime job the next day. He can picture himself standing at Virgin Street Park playing second alongside shortstop Wilbert Reed, the two chattering between pitches as Nicks spits and slaps at his well-worn Rawling’s glove as he prepares himself for any infield scenario. He feels the dirt clogging the metal spikes of his leather cleats as he digs in, the weight of his pinstriped wool uniform rich with sweat. Nick follows the pitcher’s wind up and delivery, all before he sees what he is looking for. He sprints back in a hook-like motion as a shot rings toward shallow centerfield where he rounds the ball, using the momentum to propel his throw to first base in time for the out.

At ONEOK, Sylvester eyes the modern day Boys of Summer take the field, but he also envisions his old teammates Troy Driver, the Reed Boys, Lanse Kyle, “Daddy” Brown, Locomiss Gilford, and even “Shag Bottom.” As the stadium lights illuminate the fresh-cut outfield and well-manicured infield, Nick thinks back. He still hears Tulip Mason calling Clowns games across Virgin Street’s public address system, and he chuckles as he spots a group young boys tussling over a foul ball just to redeem it for a

free soda. From his seat on a humid Tulsa night, Sylvester Nichols watches and reminisces, all the while imagining himself taking his old position at the black-owned, black-operated Virgin Street Park where he is still a star.¹⁸⁴

Sylvester Nichols is the last known living member of the inaugural 1946 black ball team, the Tulsa T-Town Clowns. He understands the nuances of the game because he played semiprofessional baseball throughout the 1940s and 1950s. But his story, much like other black ballplayers' stories, went largely unnoticed because he competed in a separate league known in various incarnations around the state as the Oklahoma Negro Leagues. Viewing race in Tulsa through the unique lens of African-American baseball allows for insight into how black athletes navigated Jim Crow and what life was like for them and their fans during the segregated era. Because Tulsa Negro Leaguers continued to compete separately during the late 1940s and early 1950s Golden Era, the sport more resembled a "gilded" time period—beautifully adorned on the outside, but rotten or hollow underneath—rather than that of true gold. Before integration spread throughout the minor leagues, Tulsa black ball teams filled more than a niche or served as a hobby in

¹⁸⁴. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols." Note: During research on the Oklahoma Negro Leagues project I had the privilege to know and befriend Sylvester Nichols. He and I regularly attended baseball games in 2013 and 2014. We sat next to each other and talked about the intricacies of the sport, about regional and professional Negro League teams and players, and about the racial components of the game prior to Oklahoma integration. Nichols reminisced about his time with the T-Town Clowns while watching the Tulsa Drillers play. When asked about if he thought he could play against today's players, he imagined that he would have been able to hold his own against high-powered pitchers. Nichols indeed imagined himself on the baseball field at ONEOK Field, but he also longed for the old days when he played on what he considered his very own "Million Dollar Infield" in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Nichols' interviews greatly contributed to this work, which cannot be overlooked. He passed away August 5, 2014. He was the last original T-Town Clown.

the city. From statehood through the early civil rights movements, each incarnation operated organized baseball clubs and recruited the best talent available. Those men of outstanding athletic ability won multiple championships and used their sporting prowess on the baseball field to occasionally transcend racial barriers.

Before the First World War flared up a hemisphere away, African-American baseball in Tulsa began to make news. Within the first full year of statehood, the 1908 Wichita Blues colored ballclub went on a multi-city “tour of several towns in Kansas” and then detoured to Tulsa to play an unnamed lineup.¹⁸⁵ The results from the game never made press, but by the 1910s Tulsa assembled several competitive black ball teams. In 1913, a year when professional white baseball went on a temporary hiatus, the Tulsa (colored) Oilers roster weighed heavy with out-of-state recruits from St. Louis, Missouri; Shreveport, Louisiana; Dallas and San Antonio, Texas; and Chicago, Illinois.¹⁸⁶ Although Negro League baseball occurred in the state as early as 1892, available accounts indicate that the Tulsa Oilers were part of the first wave of ballclubs in Oklahoma to organize and exhibit professionalism, only trailing the 1910 Oklahoma City Monarchs by three years.¹⁸⁷ The Oilers did, however, establish the first local organized black nine.

¹⁸⁵. "Baseball Challenge."

¹⁸⁶. Grayle W. Howlett, *Tulsa Oilers 1952 All-Time History and Record Book* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Grayle W. Howlett 1952), 34; McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 26; "Negro Base Ball Club."

¹⁸⁷. "Local and Personal."; "Negro Base Ball Club."; "Leland Giants to Make Long Junket."

While the Greenwood section of Tulsa bustled with enterprising business men who invested their dollars into their community with new commercial ventures, Oilers owners Freeman L. Martin, an African-American lawyer and Justice of the Peace, and his partner Elias C. Washington, a local black grocer, employed “celebrated” Chicago American Giants pitcher James People; John “Happy” Hill, a fast fielding catcher of upstanding repute recruited from St. Louis; the spit-slinging Texan hurler Jeff Phillips, and Nat Oliver “one of the best outfielders in the west.”¹⁸⁸ Martin spared no expense to formulate a winning baseball team, seeking talent across the region and furnishing his players with new uniforms.¹⁸⁹ The talent-rich black Oilers assumed the field donning spiffy baseball suits and dazzled spectators with speed and agility at South Main Park.¹⁹⁰ The squad played in a small circuit with other black ballclubs from Oklahoma City, Bartlesville, and Nowata, often advertising speed and “sensational plays” that “promise[d] to be a live one from start to finish.”¹⁹¹

Oilers management in 1913 was hell-bent for winning baseball games and strove to provide spirited entertainment to both blacks and whites. During a three o’clock

¹⁸⁸. "New Enterprises for North Greenwood," *Tulsa Star*, May 9, 1913; Polk-Hoffhine Directory Co., *Tulsa City Directory* (Polk-Hoffhine Directory Co., 1916); "Negro Base Ball Club."

¹⁸⁹. "Negro Base Ball Club."; "Negro Baseball Club Is Looking for Bear," *Tulsa Daily World*, April 10, 1913.

¹⁹⁰. "Negro Base Ball Club."

¹⁹¹. "Negro Baseball Club Is Looking for Bear."; "Colored Teams Play Here This Afternoon," *Tulsa Daily World*, April 24, 1913; "Tulsa Oilers in Action."; "Negro Base Ball Club."; "New Team of Negro Players for Tulsa," *Tulsa Daily World*, April 26, 1913; "Re-Organized Oilers Defeat Bartlesville."

showdown at South Main in the beginning of a two game series against Oklahoma City, Tulsa allotted “a special section of the grand stand reserved [specifically] for white people.”¹⁹² The capital city team brought along stiff competition, which included their smooth-fielding, slick-hitting, one-armed outfielder Oscar Frame.¹⁹³ After an embarrassing upset at the hands of the in-state rivals in front of a mixed-race crowd, owner Freeman Martin became so incensed by the loss that he jettisoned the formidable hometown Oilers lineup by disbanding every player on his newly assembled team.¹⁹⁴ According to a *Tulsa Daily World* article, the “Oklahoma City” aggregate was in all reality a “ringer” team shuttled in from Cleveland, Texas in order to win ballgames.¹⁹⁵ Martin immediately turned his focus to the team that humiliated him in his own backyard. The lawyering ballclub president contracted the whole “Oklahoma City” troupe and quickly transplanted them to the Oil Capital, which included the one-armed, outfielding bandit Oscar Frame.¹⁹⁶ Martin’s rash decision to liquidate his first team and acquire an entirely new group of men came with optimistic plans for the rest of the season:

So good did the Oklahoma City team play here against the Tulsa Oilers, that Manager Freeman Martin has disbanded his [O]ilers and has signed a contract with the other club, which in the future will sail under the Tulsa colors and make

¹⁹². "Colored Teams Play Here This Afternoon."

¹⁹³. Ibid.; "Re-Organized Oilers Defeat Bartlesville."

¹⁹⁴. "New Team of Negro Players for Tulsa."

¹⁹⁵. Ibid.

¹⁹⁶. Ibid.; "Re-Organized Oilers Defeat Bartlesville."

their headquarters here. . . . Several games have been arranged . . . [and] the new team gives promises of becoming the champion colored team of the state.¹⁹⁷

Freeman's new lineup easily handled the Bartlesville Blues in a series three days later.¹⁹⁸

Freeman Martin's efforts to produce a capable ballclub garnered attention on both sides of the city's racial divide, which provided a unique opportunity to transcend local discriminatory confinement. The *World* praised the outcome of Martin's impulsive move, opining that his team's "work compared with that of any white team in the city."¹⁹⁹ The shakeup thrilled both black and white fans with impressive glove work and hitting, and the inclusion of Oscar Frame indicates that a talented disabled athlete could compete alongside other able-bodied ballplayers.²⁰⁰ Throughout the 1913 season, race relations remained civil. The Tulsa Oilers appear to be the first black team in the city to schedule an interracial game against the local white nine.²⁰¹ The colored Oilers challenged their white opponent, likely the Tulsa All-Stars, "on the same battlefield" where they often

¹⁹⁷. "New Team of Negro Players for Tulsa."

¹⁹⁸. "Re-Organized Oilers Defeat Bartlesville."

¹⁹⁹. Ibid.

²⁰⁰. "Colored Teams Play Here This Afternoon."; "Re-Organized Oilers Defeat Bartlesville." Note: Oscar Frame's presence on a professional ballclub predated by thirty-two years the well-known one-armed major league outfielder Pete Gray who played for the St. Louis Browns in 1945.

²⁰¹. "Tulsa Oilers in Action."; "An Interesting Game," *Tulsa Daily World*, May 24, 1913.

played against other black teams at South Main.²⁰² Despite cordial interactions between mixed-race crowds and black players, Jim Crow continued to tug and tear at the social fabric in Tulsa.

Perhaps the praise in the local white paper was premature or that the communal civility of 1913 only reached a sympathetic audience, because by the next season racial tensions began to bubble and vesicate between the two societies. After an episode at the newly constructed Association Park on May 10, 1914, when “100 negroes” had “violated” the laws of separation by sitting in the park’s only grandstand, outspoken attendants leaned heavily on Tulsa baseball president Al Brown to act swiftly and build bleachers specifically for African-American patrons.²⁰³ Within days of the outcry, Brown completed the stands, thereby segregating the park.²⁰⁴

Baseball in Tulsa continued for both blacks and whites, despite such friction. According to the African-American daily, *Topeka Plaindealer*, a Kansas squad stormed into town to test the black Oilers’ quickness and agility when they “crossed bats with the Parsons team.”²⁰⁵ A week later, the Tulsa nine teed off for a three game series against the

²⁰². "Tulsa Oilers in Action." Note: Available accounts indicate that South Main Park was a white-ran ballpark, but hosted several black ballgames when the field was available.

²⁰³. "Would Bar Negroes from Grand Stand," *Tulsa Star*, May 16, 1914. Note: Association Park was located two blocks west from present-day ONEOK Field, home of the Tulsa Drillers AA ballclub.

²⁰⁴. "Bleachers to Be Erected at Once."

²⁰⁵. "Parsons, Kansas," *Topeka Plaindealer*, June 12, 1914.

Bartlesville Blues, a team with a scrappy reputation for speed and powerful pitching.²⁰⁶ The Blues games drew a diverse crowd.²⁰⁷ A month after the Association Park bleachers rose against the East Archer streetscape (See Appendix A.0), a black spectator had the intestinal fortitude to challenge “the Gods of Jim Crowism” while attending a Negro League contest between the Blues and Oilers.²⁰⁸ On June 21, the last day of the series, a “prominent Colored man dared to avail himself of a comfortable seat in the reserved seat section of the grandstand” at Association Park.²⁰⁹ The incident heightened when “he was [rudely] ordered out by an [impudent] white man.”²¹⁰ The two spectators exchanged angered words and “trouble seemed eminent,” but the “offender” gathered his wits and “left the Park vowing never to return again.”²¹¹ Historically, those of the racial superiority mind and spirit continued to make the unfair rules for African Americans in Tulsa. Ironically though, blacks still found ways to navigate around race-based hatred, most notably on the ballfields in segregated ballparks.

Taking advantage of a new season and a new name, the 1915 Tulsa Colts established a reputation as one of the “fastest [N]egro baseball teams in Oklahoma” with

²⁰⁶. "Enans (Evans) Cafe," *Tulsa Star*, June 20, 1914; "The Bartlesville Blues and the Tulsa Oilers," *Tulsa Star*, June 20, 1914; "Colored Boys Play Real Game of Ball," *Tulsa Daily World*, June 20, 1914; "Along the Color Line," *Tulsa Star*, June 27, 1914.

²⁰⁷. "Along the Color Line."

²⁰⁸. Sanborn Map Company, "Insurance Maps of Tulsa, Oklahoma 1915," (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1915); "Along the Color Line."

²⁰⁹. "Along the Color Line."

²¹⁰. Ibid.

²¹¹. Ibid.

championship potential.²¹² The Colts chomped at the bit and tethered the reins of competition early in the season as they galloped along toward a record worthy of note—many of their games played at the segregated Association Park.²¹³ Although the season's first few weeks started lukewarm, winning a few and losing a few, a strategic mid-season move enabled the Colts to hit their stride by early June.²¹⁴ The Bartlesville Blues, Washington County's colored nine that played "negro teams in all parts of the country," posed the greatest opposition to Tulsa.²¹⁵ Early in the season, when the Blues thundered into Tulsa with "players from the four corners of the United States," they twice embarrassed the Colts.²¹⁶ Because Bartlesville trounced the local nine in two runaway games, the unnamed Tulsa ownership made an aggressive move to equalize the playing field against their most imposing rival.²¹⁷ On an off day, after two days of 9 to 3 and 10 to 1 drubbings, Tulsa purchased four of Bartlesville's players.²¹⁸ The strategy paid in

²¹². "Blacks to Clash in Two Contests," *Tulsa Daily World*, June 2, 1915.

²¹³. "Visting Blacks Trim the Locals," *Tulsa Daily World*, June 3, 1915; "Negro Teams to Play Here Today."; "Colts Grab a Game."; "Blacks to Perform."; "Blacks to Clash in Two Contests."

²¹⁴. "Base Ball."; "Blacks to Clash in Two Contests."; "Sporting Dope."; "Blacks to Perform."

²¹⁵. "Blacks to Clash in Two Contests."

²¹⁶. Ibid.; "Visting Blacks Trim the Locals."; "Blues 10: Colts 1.," *Tulsa Daily World*, June 4, 1915.

²¹⁷. "Visting Blacks Trim the Locals."; "Sporting Dope."; "Blues 10: Colts 1.."; "Blacks to Perform." Note: Sources are vague about ownership of the 1915 Colts. Such a rash move echoed Freeman Martin's strategy two years before, but his involvement with the Colts team is unknown.

²¹⁸. "Visting Blacks Trim the Locals."; "Blues 10: Colts 1.."; "Blacks to Perform."

dividends, making Tulsa the *new* “strongest [N]egro team in the state.”²¹⁹ Eleven days after acquiring the talents of four new players, the Colts defeated the Oklahoma City Giants in the “deciding game” of the regular season to take security of “the championship of the state.”²²⁰

Although by 1915 black baseball began to receive more newspaper coverage and a wider amount of acceptance throughout the community, prejudiced comments occasionally made press in daily periodicals. The *World* applauded local and visiting teams’ talents, yet also intermittently belittled players with uncouth, racist, and backhanded comments that were commonly heard at the time. A local staff writer noted that the visiting Bartlesville “big league speed coons” had “made monkeys” out of the Oilers with strong offense and nearly shutout the hometown team.²²¹ Despite inflammatory language in daily rags, the Colts games often drew sizable white crowds to ballgames, especially during the Negro Leaguers’ championship series. When the Colts battled the Oklahoma City Giants, one third of the fans in attendance were white, which included many city officials.²²²

One day after the Tulsa Colts won the state championship, the Tulsa Rotary Club announced plans to help raise money for the Tulsa Humane Society’s Detention Home.²²³

²¹⁹. "Blacks to Perform."

²²⁰. "Tulsa Negro Team is State Champ."

²²¹. "Visting Blacks Trim the Locals."

²²². "Okla. City Giants Defeat Tulsa Colts."

²²³. "For Benefit of Detention Home," *Tulsa Daily World*, July 18, 1915.

The *Tulsa Daily World* and the black *Tulsa Star* both reported that the local white nine played Oklahoma City, and directly after the black equivalent took the field for the bottom of the doubleheader, “without extra charge.”²²⁴ One dollar bought admission to watch “two of the fastest [N]egro teams in the state . . . play a seven inning game immediately after the conclusion of the league contest.”²²⁵ The *Tulsa Daily World* declared that the event was “an afternoon of excitement and fun.”²²⁶ The Rotary raised “about one hundred and fifty dollars” for the cause in front of the “biggest Saturday afternoon crowd of the season.”²²⁷ Although results from the Rotary ballgames never made headlines, the presence of both white and black baseball teams playing exhibition games for a good cause shows the unique status of race in Tulsa.

Ten days after the Rotary games, the *Tulsa World* touted an interracial ballgame with “plenty of comedy” and “high class playing” between the black Tulsa Colts and white Tulsa Federals.²²⁸ According to the *World*, because they could not “find a match among [N]egroes,” the Colts intended to play the local whites in order to “show their real class.”²²⁹ Organizers recognized the allure of racial bedlam in Tulsa and the ability to

²²⁴. "All Together Detention Home," *Tulsa Star*, June 24, 1915; "Enormous Crowd to Attend Game," *Tulsa Daily World*, June 24, 1915.

²²⁵. "For Benefit of Detention Home."

²²⁶. Ibid.

²²⁷. "\$150 Will Go to Detention Home," *Tulsa Daily World*, July 25, 1915.

²²⁸. "Tulsa Federals to Play Negroes."; "Tulsa Federals to Play Colts."; "Tulsa Federals Defeat Negroes."

²²⁹. "Tulsa Federals to Play Negroes."

draw from both sides of the city, so they pushed back the interracial game time to 4 o'clock to ensure time "for business men to see the contest."²³⁰ Both teams played well. Federals errors allowed three Colts runners to score, but the momentum stalled in a stalemate that carried into extra innings.²³¹ The Federals barely won by one run in the tenth.²³² Although the Colts lost by one, they illustrated a unique paradigm for race in Tulsa: amidst Jim Crow and often-vehement racism that intentionally separated the northsiders from the southsiders, the black ballclub played hard and capitalized on Federals mishaps. Unfortunately, when the Feds eked out a win, they not only claimed the gate receipts and bragging rights, but they also reinforced preexisting divisive opinions about race and nonsensical "racial superiority."²³³ The Tulsa Colts were state champions in the colored league, but the title mattered little to those who saw them as inferior to the local white nine—especially if a boxscore "proved" it.

The racial environment in Tulsa during the late 1910s continued to exhibit enmity against African Americans who lived across the rails in Greenwood and along Standpipe Hill. Yet symptoms of a split-personality community continued to emerge. While some whites celebrated black baseball players, others envisioned African Americans as a threat to Jim Crow customs and their false sense of antebellum decorum. The last reported black ballgame of 1915 reserved "a large section for white people" to enjoy the game and

²³⁰. "Tulsa Federals to Play Colts."

²³¹. "Tulsa Federals Defeat Negroes."

²³². Ibid.

²³³. "Tulsa Federals to Play Colts."; "Tulsa Federals Defeat Negroes."

advertised the event as a time to “mingle for nine merry innings” between the Sapulpa Blues and Tulsa Colts.²³⁴ But less than a year later, the same newspaper heralded D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* and its “wild rides of the Ku Klux Klans [sic]” next to an advertisement for “Baseball Today.”²³⁵

The eve of the 1920s brought with it new beginnings and tragic endings. A year before the twenties started to roar, a new ballpark replaced the controversial Association Park. But ballpark segregation was now firmly in place. In 1919, Tulsa (white) Oilers owners Spencer Abbott and Jim Crawford leased land on the southeast side of town at the corner of 10th and Elgin streets where they built McNulty Park, the wooden edifice named after landowner and city commissioner M.J. McNulty.²³⁶ From the beginning, the stadium intended to serve the needs of whites and blacks, players and fans. However, in 1921, on a day that otherwise would have been a delightful spring afternoon, race relations seethed and the city ignited during the Tulsa Race Riot. The new baseball park became one of a few holding pens for the citizens of Greenwood during the climax of violence and widespread destruction aimed specifically one mile north of town.²³⁷

On May 31 and June 1, 1921, as Oklahoma reserve guards and National Guard troops sought to contain and curtail mob violence and civil war, black men, women, and

²³⁴. "Two Negro Teams Will Clash at Association Park at 3 O'clock."

²³⁵. "The Birth of a Nation/Baseball Today," *Tulsa Daily World*, May 7, 1916.

²³⁶. McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 227, 267.

²³⁷. "Base Ball McNulty Park Ladies' Day," *Tulsa Tribune*, May 31, 1921; "85 Are Killed in Race Riot," *Keowee (Walhalla, South Carolina) Courier*, June 8, 1921; "Negroes Shuffle to Safe Retreat Hands Held High," *Tulsa Tribune*, June 1, 1921.

children were herded like cattle to the outskirts of town and into the confines of the three-year-old stadium.²³⁸ Sombre scenes at McNulty could not be quantified with words as mothers hopelessly searched for missing children.²³⁹ Women gathered in the grandstand, shaken by the events over the past twenty-four hours—fretting for their children, their families, their homes, and themselves; meanwhile men paced aimlessly about the barren infield and sparsely-grown outfield grass.²⁴⁰ The future for the residents of Greenwood hung in a balance beyond any of their control. Prisoners in their own city, their fears and tears filled a stadium where jeers and applause usually dwelled. They sat helplessly wondering when life would go back to normal, or if there would ever be another normal. All they could do was wait—wait for the gunshots, airdrops, fire bombing, and mob violence to subside.

An unexpected consequence of the riot, both black and white Tulsa baseball also suffered with a lack of attendance. The Oilers experienced “the most disastrous [season] a Tulsa entrant in organized baseball ever encountered.”²⁴¹ They had “a poor showing all summer” and were stuck in “a disheartening slump from May until September.”²⁴² The

²³⁸. "Negroes Shuffle to Safe Retreat Hands Held High."; Ruth Sigler Avery Collection, "National Guard - Taking Negroes to Ball Park for Protection," (Oklahoma State University - Tulsa: 1921); "85 Are Killed in Race Riot."

²³⁹. "85 Are Killed in Race Riot."

²⁴⁰. Ruth Sigler Avery Collection, "Interior Shot of McNulty Park during Race Riot," (Oklahoma State University - Tulsa: 1921).

²⁴¹. "Oilers and Buffs Divide Pair on Last Day of Season," *Tulsa Daily World*, September 28, 1921.

²⁴². *Ibid.*

unspeakable displays of race-based violence understandably led to the unexpected postponement of the 1921 black baseball season in Tulsa.²⁴³

After the devastating effects of race-based violence on the citizens of Greenwood and Greater North Tulsa, by 1922 the Ku Klux Klan grew exponentially within the white sector of Tulsa. Stating that their purpose and presence was to be stewards of morality, the Klan paraded the city with “nightriders” to curtail the debaucheries and activities of bootleggers and brothels, and to enforce a skewed sense of justice.²⁴⁴ Throughout the 1920s, the Klan controlled a large swath of religious, fraternal, and political organizations.²⁴⁵

Despite all of the tumult and white supremacist Klan activity brooding about in Tulsa, black baseball unexpectedly rebounded with fervor in 1922 when the new Tulsa Black Oilers opened the season undefeated.²⁴⁶ Within a month, the Black Oilers “turned

²⁴³. "Tulsa Organize Fast Team," *Dallas Eagle*, June 4, 1921; "Ponca City, Okla News," *Negro Star* June 24, 1921. Note: Few accounts in 1921 indicate that any black baseball took place in Tulsa. Just days after the riot, optimistic press accounts indicated that the Tulsa White Sox colored team were “destined to be heard from soon,” but no other accounts followed. In late June, the Tulsa Heart Breakers trekked to Ponca City for two games and a banquet, but all other press discontinued until 1922.

²⁴⁴. Steve Gerkin, *Hidden History of Tulsa* (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2014), 24; "Airplane Leads Klan Procession in Quiet Parade," *Sunday Tulsa Daily World*, April 2, 1922. Note: Gerkin dedicates the first section of his book on “hidden” Tulsa history to the influence and impact of the Ku Klux Klan following the race riot.

²⁴⁵. Gerkin, *Hidden History of Tulsa*, 24.

²⁴⁶. "Black Oilers Win Six," *Morning Tulsa Daily World*, June 6, 1922.

the Colored Western league teams on their heads, winning 30 and losing but 4.”²⁴⁷ The first anniversary of the race riot came and went without ceremony, yet Tulsa endured—often playing on the same field that incarcerated blacks the year before. Throughout the season, the Black Oilers continually led the league; most times their opponents folded under Tulsa’s steamrolling offense. “Large crowds” filled McNulty Park to watch Tulsa “whitewash” the Russellville, Arkansas Sluggers and sweep the series.²⁴⁸ A local newspaper reporter at the *World* noted, “The Tulsa dusky ball tossers own their town now.”²⁴⁹ Aided by players like first baseman Black Rider, the team handled fine defensive fielding abilities and stout offensive power. Rider, the “Beau Brummel” dandy fashionist of the baseball field, “glommed onto the ball everywhere and made the most difficult chances look like one-o-cat.”²⁵⁰ By July 28, the *Daily World* proclaimed the Black Oilers “Undisputed Oklahoma Champions.”²⁵¹ Oftentimes, Tulsa promoters enticed local white fans to “see baseball today” in “a packed house,” or advertised “play-

²⁴⁷. Ibid.; "Black Oilers Win First Game from Russellville Clan," *Morning Tulsa Daily World*, July 22, 1922.

²⁴⁸. "Large Crowds Watch Tulsa's Black Oilers," *Morning Tulsa Daily World*, July 23, 1922; "Black Oilers Open with Fort Worth," *Morning Tulsa Daily World*, July 28, 1922.

²⁴⁹. "Large Crowds Watch Tulsa's Black Oilers."

²⁵⁰. Ibid. Note: The term “one-o-cat” refers to a child’s game consisting of home plate and one base with the intended goal of hitting and reaching base before being put out. One-o-cat in this instance implies that first baseman Black Rider made hard plays look easy, like child’s play. The real identity of Black Rider, or how he came to be called that, remains unknown.

²⁵¹. "Baseball Today Fort Worth Black Panthers," *Tulsa World*, July 28, 1922.

by-play accounts of the game between Tulsa” via a “special leased baseball wire” service.²⁵²

Ft. Worth Black Panthers and Dallas Black Giants posed as Tulsa’s greatest challenges. Yet, the Oil Capital even garnered support on the road. Near season’s end, the *Dallas Express* admitted an ironic twist that even fans in Big D wanted to see the Giants fall to T-Town. “If Tulsa can make the grade,” said the *Express*, “it will be worth while as there are many fans here who would like to see some club come here and frail the devil out of the Giants.”²⁵³ Both Dallas and Ft. Worth managed to win games against the Oilers—occasionally shutting-out the Tulsa nine. Back at home in front of a town-sized crowd, two thousand fans packed into a Dallas/Tulsa doubleheader at McNulty on same the day that Black Oiler manager Ernest Pierce asserted that he intended to “send his lads in . . . to take the final battle ‘and take it right.’”²⁵⁴ Any time Pierce experienced competitive setbacks, he remained optimistic even after Fort Worth previously stampeded “through [the Black Oilers] like and elephant through a bag of peanuts.”²⁵⁵ “We got a lot of stuff,” Pierce asserted, “and [we] are going to do it today.”²⁵⁶ Pierce’s perseverance

²⁵². "Black Oiler to Scrap Giants in Holiday Program."; "'Black Izzies' Meet Black Oilers Today."

²⁵³. "'Little World Series' May Be for Dallas," *The Dallas Express*, August 12, 1922.

²⁵⁴. "2000 Fans Watch Black Oilers and Dallas Clan Play," *Morning Tulsa Daily World*, August 21, 1922.

²⁵⁵. "Black Oilers Set for Come Back at Invaders Today," *Morning Tulsa Daily World*, August 26, 1922.

²⁵⁶. Ibid.

embodied the spirit of African Americans to overcome any adversity and to implement ingenuity. By season's end, the 1922 Oilers lost their momentum. Despite having such a strong season and winning the state championship, the organization somehow missed the opportunity or invitation to compete in the Little World Series, which went to the Dallas Black Giants and Memphis Red Sox.²⁵⁷

The following year, Tulsa black baseball remained steady, but decline loomed ahead. Perhaps setting the tone for the rest of the season, the Black Oilers squared off in a spring training game against the Dallas Black Giants in a heavy-handed loss, 7 to 1.²⁵⁸ The 1923 season lacked the same pizzazz and momentum as the 1922 run. Although the Oilers battled the professional "World's Champion Colored Team" Kansas City Monarchs in well-publicized match ups in April and again for a three game exhibition during the week of Juneteenth, the team lacked the luster from the previous year.²⁵⁹ One month into the season, Tulsa hovered in the middle of the standings.²⁶⁰ Replicating the strategies of the 1913 Oilers and 1915 Colts, the 1923 "Tulsa Greasers" attempted to reinvigorate their roster with "several new stars . . . all cocked and prime[d] for a heated

²⁵⁷. "'Little World Series' May Be for Dallas," *The Dallas Express*, August 12, 1922; "Put up Fiddle and Bow," *Dallas Express*, October 21, 1922.

²⁵⁸. "Tulsa Oilers Suffer Defeat at the Hands of Dallas Black Giants," *Dallas Express*, April 21, 1923.

²⁵⁹. "Baseball Tulsa Black Oilers vs. World's Champion Colored Team Kansas City Monarchs," *Tulsa Daily World*, April 25, 1923; "Baseball McNulty Park Kansas City Monarchs of Colored National League," *Tulsa Daily World*, June 16, 1923.

²⁶⁰. "Texas Colored League Standing of the Clubs," *Dallas Express*, May 19, 1923.

battle.”²⁶¹ Unfortunately for the current Black Oilers, the previous Oilers and Colts moves paid off in wins and in a 1915 championship. Two weeks after the roster change, the team continued to plummet down to the second-from-last place in the standings.²⁶² By June 30, luck and talent seemed to evaporate as they hovered in the same spot at an anemic .217 winning percentage.²⁶³ Tulsa then bumped around on an extended road trip through Kansas and Missouri where they met “some very tough propositions in [the] form of baseball clubs.”²⁶⁴ As the season progressed, misfortune continued.²⁶⁵ No amount of pine tar or rosin could improve the organization’s slump. At the tail end of the 1923 season, the Tulsa Black Oilers incurred legal troubles for failing to meet financial obligations to the boarding house where the team put up players.²⁶⁶ The African-American boarding house owner, E.M. Pratt, claimed the black ball club was insolvent because white owners William Norris and J.R. Utterback were “squandering the gate receipts as fast as they take them in.”²⁶⁷ Ten days after the news broke about the Black Oiler legal woes, a new “Tulsa Black All-Stars” finished the 1923 season defeating the

²⁶¹. "Tulsa Greasers Here Sunday," *Dallas Express*, May 19, 1923.

²⁶². "Giants Clean=Up on Foreign Soil," *Dallas Express*, June 30, 1923.

²⁶³. Ibid.

²⁶⁴. "Tulsa Black Oilers Coming," *Dallas Express*, July 28, 1923.

²⁶⁵. Ibid.; "Black Oilers Fall Before Izzies 14 to 12," *Tulsa Daily World*, August 6, 1923; "Black Oilers Bow to Panthers 12 to 9," *Tulsa Daily World*, August 14, 1923.

²⁶⁶. "Black Oilers Are Heavy Hitters at Table Landlord Says," *Tulsa Tribune*, August 14, 1923.

²⁶⁷. Ibid.; Polk-Hoffhine Directory Co., *Tulsa City Directory* (Polk-Hoffhine Directory Co., 1923).

Bartlesville Blues.²⁶⁸ Black baseball continued throughout the 1920s, but each year's lineups failed to match the successes of the 1922 Black Oilers.

Rob Fink notes that by the end of the twenties, "popularity and influence of the game . . . reached its peak in 1929 with the creation of the professional Texas-Oklahoma-Louisiana League (TOL).²⁶⁹ The Tulsa Black Oilers potently started the season "with a record of four wins and no [losses]."²⁷⁰ "Exciting baseball games" continued to entertain racially mixed crowds, especially when close-scoring matchups carried into fifteen innings.²⁷¹ Fink notes, "African American fans danced and cheered as the band performed."²⁷² The Tulsa Black Oilers found themselves playing well in 1929: "Only three of the league's eight teams, Houston, San Antonio, and Tulsa, finished the first half with winning records."²⁷³ For reasons unknown, Tulsa left the T-O-L league at the end of the season.²⁷⁴

After the Great Depression soundly quieted the twenties' roar, and when World War II called all able-bodied Americans into service at home and abroad, independent

²⁶⁸. "All-Stars Defeat Blues of Bartlesville, 4 to 2; Will Play Again Sunday," *Tulsa Daily World*, August 26, 1923.

²⁶⁹. Fink, *Playing in Shadows: Texas and Negro League Baseball*, 75.

²⁷⁰. Ibid., 82; "Black Oilers in Fourth Straight Win Over Dallas," *Tulsa Daily World*, May 6, 1929.

²⁷¹. Fink, *Playing in Shadows: Texas and Negro League Baseball*, 83.

²⁷². Ibid.

²⁷³. Ibid.

²⁷⁴. Ibid., 86.

baseball remained popular but fluctuated. Throughout a decade of uncertainty, as many black teams formed, just as “many black teams disbanded” because money remained a hurdle for organizers, promoters, and patrons.²⁷⁵ Scant newspaper accounts documented a few games or new developments in the 1930s. And as wartime loomed, papers dedicated the majority of coverage to war updates. Like the rest of the country, Tulsa black baseball also struggled to stay solvent as national and regional attentions focused on more pressing issues. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal programs provided more jobs and help for the needy” in the mid 1930s, which enabled a few ballclubs to field a team and, for those who had a little jingle in their pockets, to draw occasional crowds.²⁷⁶ Considered “among the strongest black nines in the Southwest,” Tulsa participated in a “clash of the titans” against state-rival Oklahoma City as three thousand fans filled the Oklahoma City ballpark in 1937.²⁷⁷ However, during the Depression, large crowds in attendance were more of an exception than the norm. Tulsa black baseball indeed experienced drastic cutbacks during the 1930s and early 1940s, but the sport continued to idle along waiting for better days.

During those lean years, Greenwood and the North Tulsa community hosted a few Tulsa Black Oilers team members and occasional characters. Sylvester Nichols fondly recalls the time when Oiler old-timer and first baseman Buster Tyson gave a first

²⁷⁵. Burke et al., *Glory Days of Summer: The History of Baseball in Oklahoma*, 259.

²⁷⁶. Ibid.

²⁷⁷. Ibid., 260.

baseman's mitt to Sylvester and a fielder's glove to his friend William Madden.²⁷⁸ Tyson offered the boys advice for batting; he said, "You can strike out. But don't look out. Whatever you do, take your cut."²⁷⁹ Sylvester also shared an interesting anecdote about Black Oilers owner Raymond Jackson and how he acquired his wealth: "He claimed oil money as 'Raymond Jackson,' but not the *right* 'Raymond Jackson.'"²⁸⁰ Apparently "*wrong*" Raymond Jackson avoided legal consequence for acquiring the money, as Nichols indicates that Jackson never experienced any troubles for claiming the funds. Full details about Raymond Jackson, the money, and the team remain vague, but Sylvester Nichols indicates that Jackson did invest his dollars into his team, which benefitted the community and lifted their spirits. During that time period, Jackson even supported an all-female black baseball team in Tulsa. Led by the powerful-pitching "Big Mama" Richardson, the women ballplayers of T-Town also garnered the reputation as athletes of supreme talent.²⁸¹

After the War, baseball regained popularity in black Tulsa when a local entrepreneur assembled a new baseball team. Alphonso Williams owned several businesses in Greenwood and North Tulsa. However, he was most known for owning Your Cab Company and the T-Town Clowns Baseball Club. From 1946 to at least 1952, the T-Town Clowns represented their African-American community as a

²⁷⁸. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."

²⁷⁹. Ibid.

²⁸⁰. Ibid.

²⁸¹. Ibid.

semiprofessional ballclub of notable repute. Second baseman Sylvester Nichols easily transferred from softball when Williams invited him to join the ball team. The well-known entrepreneur supplied his team with uniforms, balls, bats, and transportation; all the players had to furnish were their own ball gloves. "He treated us all right," says Nichols. During the '46 season, Williams provided a few of his taxicabs for the players to travel around the region.²⁸² That same year, he constructed Virgin Street Park for the Clowns. "Hollis Hughes asked Williams if we could put a field out there, from Ben Franklin to Lewis. [Alphonso] saw us playing ball, and the next thing I know, he's buying us suits, he had us traveling in his cabs, and then he bought that bus." says Nichols. "Alphonso made everything pay for itself."²⁸³

The Clowns quickly earned a reputation around the region, and beyond, as a team with grit. In 1948, after the Clowns dropped an early season game to the Jay, Oklahoma Blue Jays, the Tulsa troupe quickly regained momentum to split their wins and losses to 11 and 2 by late July.²⁸⁴ Fans often crammed into Virgin Street Park in 1949 to see their team produce a "W" in the win column: "Before a crowd of 900 or more, the T-Town Clowns shut out the Ft. Smith All [S]tars in a 10-0 finish."²⁸⁵ Tulsa completed the fifty-

²⁸². Ibid.

²⁸³. Ibid.

²⁸⁴. "Blue Jays Take T-Town Clowns 2-0," *Oklahoma Eagle*, July 15, 1948; "T-Town Clowns Defeat Okay 8-1 for 10th Straight Victory," *Oklahoma Eagle*, July 22, 1948. Note: Sylvester Nicholes recalls that the Clowns started playing as a team in 1946, however, newspaper coverage on the team did not surface until 1948.

²⁸⁵. "T-Town Clowns Shut Out Ft. Smith All Stars 10-0," *Oklahoma Eagle*, June 23, 1949.

six games season “winning forty-nine.”²⁸⁶ Occasionally drawing competition from far-off locations across the country, the Williams nine started 1950 three for three defeating the Oakland, California Beavers, the Magic City All Stars of Minot, North Dakota, and the Muskogee Cardinals during a tournament in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.²⁸⁷ Throughout the rest of the '50 season, the T-Town Clowns played McAlester, Wichita, Vinita, Wagoner, Oklahoma City, and their archrival Guthrie Black Spiders.²⁸⁸

Years before integration became common practice, Tulsa players actively traveled throughout the region to play interracial games, even in racially charged areas. “Sports [in Tulsa] have integrated more than anything.” says Sylvester Nichols. “I played a white team in 1942 in Sperry, Oklahoma.”²⁸⁹ By the late 1940s, the Clowns played a regular season schedule against both black and white teams. They traveled to Springfield, Missouri for a doubleheader in 1949 where they soundly defeated the black Hyde Park All Stars and then immediately played a second game to beat the white Ridley Red

²⁸⁶. "T-Town Clowns Will Start Season Tonight," *Oklahoma Eagle*, May 4, 1950.

²⁸⁷. "T-Town Clowns Take First Three," *Oklahoma Eagle*, May 11, 1950.

²⁸⁸. "B-A-S-E-B-A-L-L T-Town Clowns -vs- McAlester Go-Devils," *Oklahoma Eagle*, May 11, 1950; "B-A-S-E-B-A-L-L T-Town Clowns -vs- McAlester Go-Devils Wichita Kansas," *Oklahoma Eagle*, May 18, 1950; "B-A-S-E-B-A-L-L T-Town Clowns -vs- Vinita Wagoner," *Oklahoma Eagle*, May 25, 1950; "B-A-S-E-B-A-L-L T-Town Clowns -vs. Oklahoma City Elks," *Oklahoma Eagle*, June 8, 1950; "B-A-S-E-B-A-L-L Dallas, Texas -vs- Guthrie Black Spiders Sunday Eve. Winners -vs- T-Town Clowns," *Oklahoma Eagle*, June 15, 1950.

²⁸⁹. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."

Birds.²⁹⁰ Despite this time of segregation and racism, episodes of harmony and spirited interracial competition also thrived.

Historically, several African Americans with ties to Tulsa, and Oklahoma at large, have gone on to play at the professional Negro Leagues and Major Leagues level. When asked why he decided to retire instead of trying out for the big leagues, Sylvester replied that he had his chance. On the ballfield at an airbase in Enid, Oklahoma, a St. Louis Cardinals talent scout watched the Clowns play. After the game, the baseball man approached a few Tulsa players. Sylvester recalls that the scout told him that he and a few of his teammates had an opportunity to try out, but there was a catch: "He said four or five guys were good enough to play, but would have to get to Montreal, Canada until baseball fully integrated." Nichols decided not to take that gamble; he had a good job, a new bride, and was starting a family. Says Nichols, "I had a good job at Spartan Aircraft and wasn't going to give up a good job to play in the minors."²⁹¹ The promise of "maybe" making it through the rungs of the minor leagues could not sway his decision from dedicating his life to his loving wife, earning a steady paycheck, and being home to help raise his children.

As integrated baseball slowly trickled into air-conditioned homes via television screens and through radio speakers, racial inclusion also made its way onto minor league rosters and into the grandstand. During this time, the original group of Virgin Street all-stars also began the metaphorical process of hanging up their spikes. The inaugural class

²⁹⁰. "T-Town Clowns Win Double Header," *Oklahoma Eagle*, July 14, 1949.

²⁹¹. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."

Clowns desired to trade in the rigors of baseball and long Sunday night road trips for the chance to watch their families grow. Because of this, independent black baseball fans began switching their loyalties. In 1952, the Tulsa Oilers front office finally allowed “Negro boys to join Oiler’s Knothole Gang.”²⁹² Television sales ads that now offered a new way to watch “your favorite baseball stars,” compounded with the ability to watch an integrated professional ball club at the local level, accelerated the end of what had been generations of Negro League teams in Tulsa.²⁹³ African Americans continued to value baseball, but now they wanted to watch or to play in the formerly segregated leagues. And new technology allowed fans the opportunity to watch or listen from the comforts of home.

Racial progress finally reached Tulsa on April 9, 1953 when the former basketball all-star from Indiana, Charles Harmon, ran onto the field at Texas League Park and took his position at first base with the Tulsa Oilers—becoming the first “Negro [to] play in an Oiler uniform.”²⁹⁴ Though an arm injury sidelined his talents the week before, he “swatted” the “horsehide at a staggering .450 clip.”²⁹⁵ Two weeks later, the *Eagle* continued to announce that any “boys interested in baseball” had the new and unique opportunity to watch the Oilers as certified members of the YMCA Knot Hole Gang.²⁹⁶

²⁹². “Negro Boys to Join Oiler’s Knothole Gang,” *Oklahoma Eagle*, March 13, 1952.

²⁹³. “Watch Your Favorite Baseball Stars on T-V from Ellis.”

²⁹⁴. “Harmon Will Play in Oilers’ Opener, Schultz.”

²⁹⁵. Ibid.

²⁹⁶. “YMCA Knot Hole Gang,” *Oklahoma Eagle*, April 23, 1953.

Fans penned letters praising the Oilers for “the addition of Charles Harmon,” but also demanded that the Ball Club’s “next job [was] to see that the Negro has adequate seating facilities.”²⁹⁷ Harmon, “a favorite of Oil Capital fans,” conducted baseball clinics for Tulsa-area boys to learn the importance of “clean living, high morals, and good sportsmanship.”²⁹⁸ Harmon acknowledged receiving “harsh treatment” in the minors and said of his playing days for Tulsa, ““You don’t know where you’re gonna stay the next night; you don’t know how you’re gonna get to the ballpark; and you don’t know where you’re gonna eat. . . . This game is hard enough.”²⁹⁹ Harmon made the Majors with Cincinnati the next year; the same year Jeff Williams and future Hall of Famer Frank Robinson became the “new Negro players” on the Tulsa roster.³⁰⁰

Judging other comparable cities in the region during the same time period, results show that Tulsa was a typical baseball town that slowly followed trends. The African-American community in Tulsa consistently fielded competitive teams that occasionally challenged Jim Crow standards that excluded blacks from playing with whites. African-American baseball in the 1920s fostered talented teams across Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. After the Great Depression and World War II, black baseball resumed from a sporadic hiatus in the late 1940s when integration began spreading across the country.

²⁹⁷. "Baseball Fans Want Better Accomodation at Ball Park," *Oklahoma Eagle*, April 30, 1953.

²⁹⁸. "C. Harmon to Conduct Oiler Baseball Clinic," *Oklahoma Eagle*, May 21, 1953.

²⁹⁹. Moffi and Kronstadt, *Crossing the Line: Black Major Leaguers, 1947-1959*, 113.

³⁰⁰. "Tulsa Ball Club Gets New Player," *Kansas City Plaindealer*, May 14, 1954.

Yet, money was the bottom line, not racial progress. Many professional teams within the ranks of Organized Baseball witnessed the drawing power of adding black athletes to the roster. In 1952, newspapers buzzed as Dallas led the way with Dave Hoskins on their roster; Oklahoma City quickly followed with Bill Greason.³⁰¹ Tulsa waited an entire year to add a black player.³⁰² When Arkansas piggy-backed Tulsa's move a couple of weeks later, the *Oklahoma Eagle* declared: "Negroes Are in Ball to Stay."³⁰³

Tulsa professional baseball remained lukewarm a full year after Dallas and Oklahoma City successfully integrated the Texas League in 1952. Behind closed doors, however, it appears that co-owner and general manager Grayle Howlett cared little about racial progress. As Dallas Eagles and Oklahoma City Indians owners R. W. Burnett and Jimmie Humphries granted contracts to black players in 1952, Howlett remained vague and reluctant to answer definitively about his plans to add an African American to his baseball club. The Pennsylvania-based *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* noted Howlett's ambiguity on the issue and pointed out that the owner "did not actually say his club would use Negroes" when he said:

We expect each year to put a competing club in the Texas League race. Negro players have come into organized baseball in recent years and have made key contributions to winning clubs in both the major and minor leagues. Certainly we

³⁰¹. "Dallas Negro Pitcher Brilliant on Mound and at the Plate," *Oklahoma Eagle*, May 1, 1952; "Tribe Signs Negro," *The Oklahoman*, July 29, 1952; "Okla. City Club Signs Righthander."

³⁰². "Harmon Will Play in Oilers' Opener, Schultz."

³⁰³. "Negroes Are in Ball to Stay," *Oklahoma Eagle*, April 30, 1953.

in Tulsa will do nothing less than any other clubs in the Texas League are doing in the quest for the winner[,] which we all seek.³⁰⁴

When the Oilers added Harmon to the lineup in 1953, dailies celebrated the addition of a black player. Tulsa newspapers praised him for his upstanding disposition and lauded his “baseball clinics” with Green Country area youth. Yet, the excitement of Tulsa’s first professional black baseball player could not be detected in the editorials of the opening season Oilers scorecard programs. Howlett completely neglected to mention the addition of Charles “Chuck” Harmon to the April lineup. Aside from Harmon’s name listed on the roster, a short article mentions his upcoming presence for the Tulsa ballclub. The blurb on Harmon also failed to acknowledge his position on the club established a new precedence within the Oil Capital’s professional baseball operations. As the Tulsa Oilers heated up the hot stove in April 1953, the coals of Negro League baseball cooled.

For many, black ballclubs, “baseball firsts,” and pivotal events at ballparks in Tulsa had short-lived significance for several decades. A shift in thinking now has eyes turning toward regional baseball and the minority perspective and the importance of ballparks from baseball’s past. There is worth in preserving this history despite the lack of tangible evidence like stadiums or even photographs. For many African Americans, the importance of black baseball history in Tulsa encompasses more than boxscores or bricks and mortar. The sites and history represent a part of who they are. When they pass by the old McNulty Park or Virgin Street Park locations, they see their under-served histories in the race riot, in championship teams, in successful business endeavors, and in local all-stars who mentored in the community. They see past vacant parking lots and

³⁰⁴. “Football Decides Dallas Baseball Club to Bring in Negro Players.”

barren fields. For them, old ballpark haunts embody more than what others mistake for nostalgia or neighborhood pride. Instead, those feelings represent more; they represent a sense of place.

CHAPTER IV

THE HISTORY REMAINS: A SENSE OF PLACE AND SENSE OF RACE, BALLPARKS OF THE TULSA BLACK BASEBALL ERA

“From historians who wrote long ago to those who write today, geographical location has been an abiding theme. Put it another way, many historians are part geographer, as interested in ‘where’ events occurred as they are in ‘who,’ ‘how,’ and ‘why.’”³⁰⁵

—Myron P. Gutman, *Past Time, Past Place: GIS for History*

On January 11, 2014, as the winter sunlight eased over the horizon past B.C. Franklin Park, Sylvester “Nick” Nichols walks the barren area of dead grass and patches of gravel at the former location of Virgin Street Park, the place where his baseball star shined for seven seasons. The terrain, now rutted and misshapen, has become forgettable at best. Slowly, over a half century, the basepaths, pitching mound, dugouts, and grandstand disappeared. To the south, cutting across where the outfield used to be, the whoosh of high-speed travelers darting by on the four-lane super-slab now hushes the moan of the old Atchison-Topeka railway that used to run just beyond the treeline.

³⁰⁵. Anne Kelley Knowles, *Past Time, Past Place: GIS for History* (Redlands, California: ESRI Press, 2002).

Despite this absence and neglect, Nichols never much mentions what the location currently lacks. As he shuffles from spot to spot where the old ballpark once stood, he does, however, talk about how this site once was a thriving area for the local black community. Standing near what would have been his old second base position, he remembers his teammates and speaks fondly of owner Alphonso Williams—the man who provided an opportunity for those men to play professionally every summer and a setting for recreation and respite.³⁰⁶

Nichols points to the areas where Williams' other businesses surrounded the ballpark; the Eagle Bar beer tavern, The Rose Room entertainment club, and the old general store that sold “the cheapest gas in town” to local motorists. They all resided on the property before U.S. Route 75 mowed through much of the outfield, claiming a swath of houses in the adjacent Sunnyslope neighborhood, and dead-ending the Virgin Street thruway (See Appendices A.12-A.15).³⁰⁷ This open field where a pocket of commerce once flourished now sits practically abandoned save for a few little league baseball and football games. For Nichols, though, this space represents more than the uneven, unmemorable open span of land; for him the area has a far greater value because of its

³⁰⁶. Sylvester Nichols. Interviewed by W. Jacob Cornwell. Interviews with Sylvester Nichols. July 9, August 6, 7, 9, 11.

³⁰⁷. "1958 Aerial Line Drawing Tulsa," (Paul Uttinger Map Collection: 1958); "Tulsa " (Oklahoma State University Map Collection, 1951); "1964 Aerial Map Tulsa," (Oklahoma State University Map Collection, 1964); Truman A. Hartshorn et al., *Interpreting the City: An Urban Geography*, 2nd ed. (Wiley, 1992).

past—a past that incarnates in many African-American Tulsans’ minds as a sense of place.³⁰⁸

Urban geographer Truman Hartshorn notes that a sense of place arises from “the intense feeling generated for a particular site, . . . [and] is manifest in our society through a sentimental attachment we identify with a particular location.”³⁰⁹ Hartshorn observes that the sense of belonging to “my place” easily transfers to neighborhoods, buildings, plots of land, and, as this research shows, also to baseball parks. Residents within particular sectors in a community take an “ownership” of the sites associated with them, and they also integrate imaginary boundaries that separate neighbors from strangers and vice versa. According to Hartshorn, “Neighborhoods often present a dichotomy based on both an ‘insider’s’ and ‘outsider’s’ view.”³¹⁰ He goes on to say that those who live within the area will look at their place in a positive or affectionate way, whereas the outsider can perceive the area as “undesirable” or even dangerous.³¹¹ For instance, North Tulsa has been given an undue reputation as the crime-ridden part of the city. There are plenty of Tulsans who feel uncomfortable trudging north of Interstate 244 because of the racial and socioeconomic divide in the city, but crime happens all over town in relatively low numbers. Some of those fears have merit, yet much of the anxiety

³⁰⁸. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."; Truman A. Hartshorn et al., *Interpreting the City: An Urban Geography*, 2nd ed. (Wiley, 1992).

³⁰⁹. Hartshorn et al., *Interpreting the City: An Urban Geography*, 214.

³¹⁰. Ibid.

³¹¹. For additional information about significant baseball parks, the professional Negro Leagues, and the rise and fall of black business see the following books. Ibid.

happens because of the mystery from the surrounding unfamiliar places. Even though the northside rarely sees neighborhood improvements, locals are proud of their part of the city and the majority of those residents are hard working, and the salt of the earth. Unfamiliarity affects everyone because of the fear of the unknown, but much of the unease derived from a perceived threat in Tulsa is unfounded.

Building on the close-up look at Tulsa black baseball, this chapter illustrates the importance and roles of various ballparks where Tulsa teams played. Several books document the histories and dimensions of famous major league and professional Negro League ballparks, while other texts outline the rise and fall of the Negro League empire after integration. Both works often miss the cultural significance of how regional and semiprofessional Negro League-related teams and ballparks affected those places around the country.³¹² From the historic preservation perspective, the cultural value of ballpark sites in Tulsa cannot be understated because, even if the structure is gone, the history remains where African Americans once played. Both historic preservationists and cultural geographers alike can use these sites for educational purposes. Regularly, historians and geographers work together to preserve regional sites through mapping and

³¹². Rogosin, *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues*; Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*; James Buckley, Jr., *Classic Ballparks: A Collection of Images and Memorabilia* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004); Ronald M. Selter, *Ballparks of the Deadball Era: A Comprehensive Study of Their Dimensions, Configurations and Effects on Batting, 1901-1919* (McFarland & Co, 2008); Roberta J. Newman and Joel Nathan Rosen, *Black Baseball, Black Business: Race Enterprise and the Fate of the Segregated Dollar* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2014); Philip J. Lowry, *Green Cathedrals: The Ultimate Celebration of Major League and Negro League Ballparks*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Walker & Co, 2006); Bill Shannon and George Kalinsky, *The Ballparks* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1975).

three-dimensional modeling to recreate long-gone structures. Preservationists can illustrate what was once on site and what has been lost. Cultural geographers can purvey the value of the site for its topographical importance, as well as how the ballparks affected the region.

The history of old ballpark sites is of great import for the community of Tulsa because, with knowledge, these locations represent a communal sense of place and the spirit of endurance to prevail over adversity. Geographers Lisa DeChano and Fred Shelley note that sports, particularly Negro League baseball, provoke thought about geography and the “strong links to place” surrounding sports culture by how teams and players affect people’s understandings of a region.³¹³ Magnifying upon individuals like Sylvester Nichols or Alphonso Williams provides an intimate portrait to contextualize who played on or organized teams outside segregated baseball. DeChano and Shelley acknowledge that “sport is also closely related to cultural, racial, ethnic, and gender identity.”³¹⁴ Tulsans on the northside felt that the local black nine was “their team” because they knew many players and their families or adopted recruited athletes as their own. Teams like the Tulsa Colts, Tulsa Black Oilers, and T-Town Clowns represented for African-American residents not only the promise of watching a spirited game of pitch, hit, and run, but also the pride of claiming their very own professional teams from their own race. Identifying the history and geography of various baseball parks in the city can teach citizens at large about racial tensions, Jim Crow policies, violence against fellow

³¹³. Lisa M. DeChano and Fred M. Shelley, "Using Sports to Teach Geography: Examples from Kansas City," *Journal of Geography* 103, (2004).

³¹⁴. Ibid.

citizens, and how baseball worked as a mechanism to transcend racial barriers that allowed the exhibition of talent. The absence of tangible structures illustrates the permanence and irreplaceable void created by razing the palatial confines, which is why many enthusiasts save and collect old ballpark signage, stadium seats, uniforms, and ephemeral pieces like baseball cards—grasping onto the remnants of those places and seizing nostalgic experiences.

During the pre-integration years, Tulsa long-suffered from a sporting split personality—whites accepted African-American baseballers, so long as they fit within the social hierarchy, a rung just above the bottom. Years before Sylvester Nichols took his position at Virgin Street Park, professional black baseball had already existed and occasionally excelled for nearly half a century. As early as 1908, regional Negro League contests occurred in Tulsa when the Wichita Blues barnstormed into town.³¹⁵ Many times, players performed in front of mixed crowds, but early race relations in the city were hot-cold, teetering more toward hostility than hospitality. Blacks and whites mingling challenged the social order of the time. Taken as a personal affront, white spectators demanded blacks, especially black fans, abide by Jim Crow policy. Because of this, segregated ballparks became part of the social landscape in 1914.

Exacerbating this social schizophrenia, negative attitudes toward African-American ballpark patrons erupted after an incident at Association Park. The black weekly *Tulsa Star* noted the evening edition of the *Tulsa Daily World* “[threw] a double

³¹⁵. "Baseball Challenge." Note: At present time, no known outlets exist to access the evening editions of the *Tulsa World*, or the original sources would have been included.

jointed fit,” saying: “Nearly 100 [N]egroes had seats in the grandstand at Association park Sunday. Many white people were incensed at this violation of Jim Crow ethics, and if the affair is repeated there are a number of individuals who will withdraw their support from the local club [*sic.*].”³¹⁶ According to the *Star*, the *Tulsa World* “seem[ed] to have an eternal [grudge] against the Negroes of the city.” The outraged party complained how “management promised to erect bleachers” two weeks prior, but had not satisfactorily completed the segregated seating arrangements. The persistent protesters “insist[ed] that no one [would] lose any money by providing bleachers at both ends of the grandstand,” and even proposed taking up a collection to meet the cost of building materials and labor “if there is no other way of getting relief.”³¹⁷

If any doubts existed concerning the *Tulsa Star*’s credibility, a day after the news broke, the *World* went to press with an update saying: “BLEACHERS TO BE ERECTED AT ONCE” at Association Park (See Appendix A.3).³¹⁸ The unnamed columnist opined: “It will almost be necessary for them to build [the bleachers so] that a portion of the seats can be set aside for colored people as the public has demanded that something be done with the negroes [*sic.*], who have heretofore occupied seats in the grandstand with whites.”³¹⁹ The writer also insisted the new addition “affords a place for the colored people and for those who would rather sit in bleachers than in a grandstand,” insinuating

³¹⁶. "Would Bar Negroes from Grand Stand."

³¹⁷. Ibid.

³¹⁸. "Bleachers to Be Erected at Once."

³¹⁹. Ibid.

the stands served a dual purpose and how whites had free reign to both sections.³²⁰ Even though the movement to segregate and isolate black spectators at the ballpark succeeded in 1914 (See Appendices A.1-A.2), the complex still hosted Negro League baseball.³²¹ This juxtaposition provided a space for the local black team to play, but the crowds became a casualty of Jim Crow rule in Oklahoma.

Less than a year later, the Tulsa Colts regularly played in front of the grandstand where president Al Brown disallowed them to sit. Conversely, the season following the bleacher fiasco, the hardscrabble Negro baseball organization rivaled teams throughout the region and frequently competed in Association Park—occasionally to the joy of a segregated-yet-interracial crowd.³²² By mid June, as summer heated up the burgeoning Oil Capital, the Colts blazed through season's end earning the title "Colored Baseball State Champions."³²³ The team won two out of the three game series at the Tulsa ball

^{320.} Ibid. Note: A 1915 Sanborn map and bird's-eye view of Tulsa in 1918 (Appendices A.1 and A.2) reveal that Association Park occupied the present-day 200-block between Cincinnati and Detroit, boxed in by Brady to the north and Archer to the south. The first built stands adjoined the eastern side of the grandstand closest to Archer in 1915, the second set completed before 1918.

^{321.} Sanborn Map Company, "Insurance Maps of Tulsa, Oklahoma 1915."; Fowler & Kelly, "Aero View of Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1918," in *Historic Urban Plans* (Ithica, New York: Fowler & Kelly, 1972).

^{322.} "Blues 10: Colts 1."; "Colts Grab a Game."; "Negro Teams to Play Here Today."; "Okla. City Giants Defeat Tulsa Colts."

^{323.} "Tulsa Colored Base Ball Team Wins State Championship."; "Tulsa Negro Team is State Champ."

grounds in a tight battle against the Oklahoma City Giants.³²⁴ Illustrating this racial dichotomy, the *World*, the same paper the *Star* called out for harboring a racial grudge, covered Colts games regularly. The white paper noted that one game in the series drew Caucasian fans in large measure “when about seven hundred people turned out, and out of this number fully one-third were white persons. Many of the city officials were present and enjoyed the sport.”³²⁵ The segregated stadium served a pivotal role in the Colts’ ability to play professional games and inevitably contributed to them winning the state championship. But it also reinforced the racial double standard. White newspapers continued covering Oklahoma Negro teams’ exploits and their games periodically. Baseball worked to the African-American ballplayers’ advantage, helping them sidestep societal segregation. By the late 1910s, race relations began to improve, however, racial tensions in Tulsa continued to pressurize leading up to the early 1920s.

Association Park served the community’s baseball needs for four years, the wooden architecture becoming obsolete after the 1917 season.³²⁶ Professional baseball in Tulsa paused in 1918 as citizens prioritized and focused their efforts toward a World

³²⁴. "Negro Teams to Play Here Today."; "Okla. City Giants Defeat Tulsa Colts."; "Tulsa Colts Win from O. C. Giants."; "Tulsa Negro Team is State Champ."

³²⁵. "Okla. City Giants Defeat Tulsa Colts."

³²⁶. McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 266. Note: M.J. McNulty did not take full ownership of the property until 1920. Land records retrieved from the Tulsa County Clerk’s Land Record Office indicate M.J. McNulty’s partner David McHodge signed over his share of the land with a Quit Claim Deed (QCD) in October of 1920. The QCD infers that McHodge relinquished his interest in the property to McNulty, but no money formally exchanged hands. According the records, McNulty retained control of the land until 1931; no lease records for Abbott or Crawford show up in the document.

War, but once the war ended and baseball resumed, plans began in 1919 to construct a brand new stadium on the outskirts of downtown. According to Wayne McCombs, Oilers owner Spencer Abbott “persuaded the son of [street commissioner Martin J. McNulty, Jr.] to convince his father to lease his land at 10th Street and Elgin.”³²⁷ The kind-eyed McNulty let the property to Abbott, presumably with a stipulation that the new venue adopt the landholder’s namesake when the new baseball palace opened.³²⁸ Short on funds and obligated to finish the project, Abbott partnered with Irish-born, oil-money millionaire Jim Crawford.³²⁹ With Crawford’s money in hand, Abbott trekked to St. Louis to have Sportsman Park contractor Ed Stienger design the new Tulsa stadium, using the St. Louis grounds as the template.³³⁰ McNulty underwent complete construction in just twenty-two days and served as home for the Oilers, a venue for major league exhibitions, as well as a place for local Negro League games when the local team traveled abroad.³³¹

^{327.} Ibid., 35; Polk-Hoffhine Directory Co., *Tulsa City Directory* (Polk-Hoffhine Directory Co., 1920), 339; Tulsa County Clerk Office: Land Records, "McNulty Park Land Records," (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Tulsa County, 1920-1973).

^{328.} Tulsa Historical Society, "M.J. McNulty "It's the Man in the Shirt"," (Tulsa, Oklahoma: 1940); McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 35, 267.

^{329.} McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 35, 227. Note: Stienger purportedly built major league Sportsman Park, home of the American League Browns and National League Cardinals.

^{330.} Ibid., 35, 267.

^{331.} Ibid.; "Black Oiler to Scrap Giants in Holiday Program."

As the pillars of Association's grandstand and bleachers tumbled to the ground and a new stadium ascended into the city skyline, the Tulsa workers razed a ballpark with a muddled and contradictory reputation. White patrons demanded and established ballpark segregation, yet allowed black athletes the ability to shine on the field. Calls for blacks to adhere to Jim Crow policies outweighed their ability to look past antiquated societal protocol. Tulsa's race relations still seethed, ready to erupt at the smallest provocation. By happenstance, McNulty Park would become part of an emotional triage during the next racial conflict on the ominous day in late May 1921 when a civil war besieged the citizens of Greenwood for two days, claiming untold numbers of lives and destroying millions of dollars in property. The Tulsa Race Riot decimated the "Little Africa" section of town, forcibly setting back the clock on racial harmony and civil coexistence (See Appendix A.4).³³²

When the Tulsa Race Riot exploded on May 31, 1921, the Tulsa Oilers had a scheduled promotional "Ladies' Day" doubleheader starting at 2:30 p.m. against the Oklahoma City Indians.³³³ Information remains unclear whether these games proceeded

³³². "Report 3,000 Negroes from Owasso on Way to Bartlesville," *Tulsa Tribune*, June 1, 1921; Tulsa Historical Society, "Little Africa on Fire," in *Beryl Ford Collection*, (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Tulsa City-County Library, 2014).

³³³. "Base Ball McNulty Park Ladies' Day." Note: Although the Tulsa Race Riot still requires much more research and exploring, there are plenty of books dedicated to the build-up, fallout, and consequences from the turbulent forces waged against African Americans in the city. "Diamond Dick" Rowland's involvement as the catalyst who started the confrontation for allegedly groping or assaulting Miss Sarah Page remains shrouded in mystery. Historians continue to debate if the event even happened or if Rowland and Page were more than passing acquaintances, but likely lovers. For more information on the Race Riot, read the Red Cross's report accounting the incident *1921 Tulsa Race Riot: The American Red Cross - Angels of Mercy* or Steve Gerkin's book

during the tumultuous time. As civil unrest engulfed the city in all-out war, governor James Robertson felt his last option to curb the mayhem was to institute Martial Law.³³⁴ National Guard soldiers attempted to make order of the destructive chaos by herding many African Americans to locations large enough to hold sizable crowds, particularly Convention Hall (now known as Brady Theater) and McNulty Park.³³⁵ By early morning on June 1, troops rounded up thousands of black citizens and corralled them inside the McNulty Park like livestock heading for the slaughter.³³⁶ Few images exist from the moments when troops interned local blacks in the ballpark, but one photograph depicts several African Americans marching toward McNulty Park “for protection” (See Appendix A.5).³³⁷ The *Tulsa Tribune* outlined the trail of humiliation from Greenwood to McNulty Baseball Park:

Tramp, tramp, tramp, through the dusty streets they strode, ever under the watchful eye of the white man’s authority and the white man’s gun. Negro women, more brazen and unafraid than their menfolks ... gazed on the unfriendly

Hidden History of Tulsa that dedicates a few chapters to flush out the histories of Rowland and Page and documents the Ku Klux Klan power of influence on the city during and after the riot. The goal of this research is not to repeat what others have already written. Rather the intent of this work will illustrate the importance McNulty Park played during the riot but also the following year and decade.

³³⁴. "Martial Law Halts Race War," *Tulsa Tribune*, June 1, 1921.

³³⁵. "Roland Not a Native of Tulsa," *Washington (D.C.) Bee*, June 25, 1921.

³³⁶. "85 Are Killed in Race Riot."; "Negroes Shuffle to Safe Retreat Hands Held High."; Ruth Sigler Avery Collection, "Interior Shot of McNulty Park during Race Riot."

³³⁷. Tulsa Historical Society Archives, "National Guard - Taking Negroes to Ball Park for Protection."

street throngs ... to sense the fact that it was a most serious epoch in their lives, and much of their bravado had left them by the time they reached the ballpark.³³⁸

A cathedral to baseball became a provisional prison for thousands of African Americans.³³⁹

The black men of Tulsa, emasculated by the angry mobs, the women, left feeling helplessly insecure about protection for their children's lives. A second photograph taken at the ballpark clearly shows black riot victims walking aimlessly or sitting in the grandstand trying to process the entirety of the situation (See Appendix A.6).³⁴⁰ An article in the South Carolina's *Keowee Courier* illustrates the national impact among African Americans and the chaotic situation inside the stadium corral: "Scenes in the Tulsa ball park beggared description. Whole families of [N]egroes had become separated in the rioting and subsequent round up by the troops. Mothers wailed piteously as the soldiers searched for missing children."³⁴¹ From the ballfield corral, scared women, no longer brazen, moaned and mourned in the absence of their children. The Tulsa Race Riot burned for twenty-four hours, leaving many dead or homeless, children orphaned, and survivors reeling in the aftermath and full of despair. Within the first week, as the

³³⁸. "Negroes Shuffle to Safe Retreat Hands Held High."

³³⁹. Tulsa Preservation Commission, 2013. "Tulsa History: African-American Settlement (1836-1945)," <http://www.tulsapreservationcommission.org/history/africanamerican/>.

³⁴⁰. Ruth Sigler Avery Collection, "Interior Shot of McNulty Park during Race Riot."

³⁴¹. "85 Are Killed in Race Riot."

embers cooled and the dead buried, the black side of Tulsa consisted mostly of rubble, ash, mangled steel, and tent cities.

After the riot subsided, as residents attempted to pick up the ashen pieces, white baseball eventually resumed, however, black baseball virtually disappeared from local newspaper coverage.³⁴² Judging from the lack of periodical accounts for black baseball in 1921 and seeing the consequential ruinous effects of racially-motivated violence in the city, it can be inferred that the riot prematurely ended the 1921 Tulsa black baseball season.³⁴³

McNulty Park served in a different capacity for African Americans in 1922. Throughout the season, when the white club traveled to play away games, the Tulsa Black Oilers regularly assumed the vacant ballfield.³⁴⁴ As Greenwood worked to rebuild and rebound from the massacre, ten blocks south the Black Oilers entered the ballpark wielding heavy-hitting lumber and smooth-fielding leather. Ready to ameliorate the wounds caused by racial division, often on the very field where hundreds of blacks had

³⁴². Ibid. Note: The only mention of black baseball in 1921 occurred in June, just days after the riot. The *Dallas Eagle* noted on June 4 Tulsa formed a “fast team” called the Tulsa White Sox. No other news of the White Sox team ever surfaced. The *Negro Star* reported when a team called the Tulsa Heart Breakers visited Ponca City, Oklahoma to play two games and attend a banquet. No other updates followed. The next mention of Tulsa black baseball occurred prior to the next season on May 4, 1922 when Tulsa joined the newly formed Western League of Colored Baseball Clubs.

³⁴³. "Tulsa Organize Fast Team."; "Ponca City, Okla News."; "Organize Western League of Colored Ball Clubs," *Black Dispatch (Oklahoma City)*, May 4, 1922.

³⁴⁴. "Large Crowds Watch Tulsa's Black Oilers."; "Baseball Today: Dallas Black Giants."; "Baseball Today Fort Worth Black Panthers."; "Black Oiler to Scrap Giants in Holiday Program."

anxiously waited out the rest of the race war, the team became a beacon of hope as they produced one of the best seasons in black baseball since the Colts won the crown in 1915. By the first anniversary of the riot, the Oilers won the first three games of the season on the road and remained undefeated throughout the first week.³⁴⁵ Game after game, the Tulsa aggregate consecutively outplayed their opponents. The Negro Leaguers continued on a winning streak, and by mid July the black ballclub sat comfortably with a record of 30 wins and 4 losses.³⁴⁶ The club's winning record continued to draw large crowds to McNulty Park to see the local Negro League nine trounce their opponents.³⁴⁷ The momentum propelled the team toward another state title.³⁴⁸

Here exists an anomaly. In a unique way, within the first few years of existence, McNulty Park served two complex roles in Tulsa's African-American history. At first, the park became this symbol of Jim Crow oppression, serving as the not-so-friendly confines that housed thousands while they sat helpless in involuntary captivity. Yet by the next, year Jim Crawford's church of baseball became an avenue for success and provided hope to those in the black community. The 1922 Tulsa Black Oilers ballclub played on the very same ballfield where, in all likelihood, the players might have been themselves victims, or at the very least knew others who were forcibly detained on the field or in the bleachers in 1921. As the 1922 team won acclaim, it also appears that both

³⁴⁵. "Tulsa Clan Defeats Black Indians Again," *The Oklahoman*, June 2, 1922; "Black Oilers Win Six."

³⁴⁶. "Black Oilers Win First Game from Russellville Clan."

³⁴⁷. "Large Crowds Watch Tulsa's Black Oilers."

³⁴⁸. "Baseball Today Fort Worth Black Panthers."

blacks and whites likely attended games at McNulty Park to watch the men knockout the crowd with their acrobatic defense and potent offense. While not explicitly stated, articles published in the *Tulsa World* indicate that the paper reached out to “locals” to watch the Black Oilers: “Although the Tulsa Oilers are off on the road local fans will have an opportunity to see baseball today and arrangements are being made to take care of a packed house.”³⁴⁹ On another occasion, the *World* again advertised during the Black Oilers homestand “play-by-play” accounts of away games via telegrams or ticker paper through wire updates.”³⁵⁰ Regardless of how the news came across the wire, when ballgame promoters integrated out-of-town updates and planned for large crowds, they certainly attempted to reach a wider audience and draw locals to watch a black ballclub perform while the white team traveled abroad.

Occasionally on the nights when the white Oilers played at home in McNulty, the Black Oilers found other venues to play their games. One such place was Compton League Park. Little information exists on about the park, and land records do not reveal very many clues. But a 1922 ad for a game there indicates that the park sat at the intersection of Pine and Greenwood.³⁵¹ Unfortunately, Sanborn maps and historic or modern aerial photographs of the area reveal little information detailing a concise and definitive location of the ballpark. Compton League Park probably served the African-American community’s needs and was little more than a sandlot.

³⁴⁹. "Black Oiler to Scrap Giants in Holiday Program."

³⁵⁰. "'Black Izzies' Meet Black Oilers Today."

³⁵¹. "Baseball: Denison Red Snappers."

In hindsight, McNulty Park has become a now-invisible cultural landmark entangled in racial animosity and occasional harmony. Considering the havoc that occurred just one year before, the story of the 1922 Tulsa Black Oilers' inspirational winning season in the same park where many African Americans sat in fear and anxiously waited out the rest of the race war serves as a symbol of hope and perseverance in the face of adversity. The wooden stadium's pejorative reputation likens it to a cage, yet the field oftentimes provided a place where Tulsa Negro Leaguers earned their bragging rights as state champs. The Black Oilers continued to play with relative success at McNulty Park throughout the rest of the 1920s. As seasons passed, the 1920s Black Oilers culminated with a last hoorah when the Tulsa team entered the Texas-Oklahoma-Louisiana (T-O-L) upstart Negro League in 1929.³⁵² For the price of a seventy-five cents admission, a fan could watch former Kansas City Monarchs pitcher William "Plunk" Drake manage the hometown blackballers as Reginald Hopwood, and brothers Luther "Little Sox" Gilyard and Claude "Big Sox" Gilyard "walloped" the Dallas Black Giants by a stunning 22 to 8 score. At least between the baselines, baseball remained democratic at McNulty Park.³⁵³

The downtown sporting complex lasted eleven seasons, from 1919 to 1929. The ten-year lease expired in the fall of 1928; both the Oilers and Black Oilers played another year before moving out.³⁵⁴ At season's end in 1929, McNulty Park became embroiled in

³⁵². "Black Oilers Open Against Dallas Today."

³⁵³. "Baseball McNulty Park Tenth and Elgin Today," *Tulsa World*, May 3, 1929; "Black Oilers Wallop Dallas by 22-8 Count," *Tulsa World*, May 4, 1929.

³⁵⁴. "New Ball Park to be at 21st and Lewis," *Tulsa World*, April 27, 1929.

controversy and city bureaucracy. With the lease expired, city officials balked against the ballpark owner's request to enhance the complex's seating capacity. The city declared the park "unsuitable" for use, which allowed Oklahoma City developer John Harden the opportunity to raze the stadium and erect his art deco Warehouse Market in 1930.³⁵⁵ During that time, plans for a ballpark at 21st and Lewis began to make news.³⁵⁶ M.J. McNulty leased and eventually sold the property to Harden in the early 1930s to make room for his grandiose grocery store.³⁵⁷

Before construction began in 1930 on Harden's art deco Tulsa Public Market Company (now known as the Warehouse Market building), crews razed McNulty Park to provide room for ample parking. Coincidentally in 1930, as bleachers, press boxes, and dugouts plummeted to the ground, Oilers owner Jim Crawford passed away. Crawford's former partner Spencer Abbott who brought the Oilers to Tulsa from Hutchison, Kansas recalled, "The day they started to tear old McNulty down in the winter of '30, Jim Crawford died."³⁵⁸ Abbott's timeline might have been off by a few months because mosaic tiles on the entrance floor date the building to (late) 1929, but the impact of his words poetically illustrates how important the ballpark was to Crawford.

³⁵⁵. McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 61; Tulsa County Clerk Office: Land Records, "McNulty Park Land Records."

³⁵⁶. "New Ball Park to be at 21st and Lewis."

³⁵⁷. Tulsa County Clerk Office: Land Records, "McNulty Park Land Records."

³⁵⁸. McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 227.

After McNulty Park met the wrecking ball in 1930, the new baseball stadium at 21st and Lewis promised back in 1929 never fabricated. According to Wayne McCombs, bureaucratic squabbling over land and locations in 1930 and 1931 caused a lapse in professional baseball for the city.³⁵⁹ Still without a home ballpark in 1932, the Oilers moved to the fairgrounds between 15th and 21st Streets, west of Yale Avenue, where they played for a couple of years at the Tulsa County Fairgrounds Stadium until a new baseball grounds could be completed.³⁶⁰ The Tulsa Black Oilers also played at the temporary ballpark in 1934 in what appears to have been an interracial duel against the East Side Commercial club of the City league.³⁶¹ By mid-season 1934, the white Oilers moved into fresh new digs northwest of the fairgrounds stadium called Texas League Park.³⁶² Texas League Park, later known as Oiler Park, primarily hosted white professional ballgames, but occasionally Negro League teams barnstormed into town to the delight of black and white fans. However, the Jim Crow policies established in 1914 still applied to the new ballpark throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s. An architectural rendering for improvements in 1946 shows that Texas League Park had

³⁵⁹. Ibid., 61.

³⁶⁰. Ibid., 267. Note: The article names the East Side Commercial Club as “runners-up in the first half of the City league,” and not identifying them as a black ballclub. However, the text specifically notes the Eastsiders “will play the Tulsa Black Oilers, local Negro team.” Judging from the separation of race for one team, and that the article posted in the *Tulsa Daily World*, there is the strong possibility that the game between the two teams was an interracial competition.

³⁶¹. "Eastsiders Will Play Black Oilers Here Today," *Tulsa Daily World*, June 19, 1934.

³⁶². McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 267-268.

separately defined entrances, concessions, and restrooms for African Americans.³⁶³

Local Negro League nines periodically played at the complex until the Tulsa Oilers became integrated in 1953.³⁶⁴ Sylvester Nichols notes that years before he played for the T-Town Clowns he played on an unnamed ball team against a black Muskogee team at Texas League Park in 1942.³⁶⁵

Like much of the country, as citizens tightened their belts scrimping and saving during the Great Depression, and as people prepared and sacrificed for World War II, black baseball in Tulsa began a slow decline.³⁶⁶ Compounded by the problems that the ballpark debacles caused after McNulty Park closed, local Negro Leaguers struggled to find a reliable venue.³⁶⁷ For roughly a decade baseball continued, but in more sporadic fashion and in lower numbers of games per season. During that time, the Tulsa Black

³⁶³. Ibid., 281.

³⁶⁴. "Harmon Will Play in Oilers' Opener, Schultz."

³⁶⁵. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."

³⁶⁶. Note: Virtually no sources exist for black baseball during the early 1940s. The *Oklahoma Eagle* dedicated most coverage to major league happenings or the contributions of African Americans both at home and abroad to the World War effort. Occasional softball league scores made the paper, but local professional baseball remained at large until the late 1940s.

³⁶⁷. McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 61. Note: Rob Fink explains in his chapter dedicated to the Texas-Oklahoma-Louisiana League how after 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, many Negro League teams became insolvent causing an exodus in the league. Because the 1929 Black Oilers played a majority of home games in McNulty Park, Tulsa left the T-O-L league after one year. The exodus likely occurred because the team could not secure a regular ballpark for scheduled competition after 1930.

Oilers faded into obscurity. Not until after the War would baseball in Tulsa regain popularity.

As men returned home from the service, changes began to happen in Negro League baseball in Tulsa. Many veterans resumed their love for the game by joining recreational baseball and softball leagues to keep the sporting spirit alive.³⁶⁸ After the War, Sylvester Nichols played softball for a couple of teams until black entrepreneur Alphonso Williams recruited Nichols to play hardball for the newly-formed T-Town Clowns in 1946 (See Appendix A.9).³⁶⁹ Williams owned four lots in the Conservation Acres Subdivision sector on Virgin Street where he operated his bar, an entertainment club, and a general store/gas station. Within the first year, the high-voiced, khaki-clad baseball owner utilized his land and means to build a ballpark specifically for his team and named it Virgin Street Park (See Appendix A.9 and A.11).³⁷⁰ Land records indicate Williams took ownership of the four-lot property on Virgin Street in 1943, just west of

³⁶⁸. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."; Ted Owens. Interviewed by W. Jacob Cornwell. Interview with Ted Owens. July 17.

³⁶⁹. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols." Note: Alphonso Williams' gravestone spells his first name with a "z," as do land records from the Tulsa County Tax Assessor's office. However, for the sake of continuity, the "s" spelling will be used throughout this project because that is how Williams' name first appeared on the T-Town Clowns team photograph in 1946 (See Appendix A.9). Alphonso Williams named his team the "Clowns," a popular race designate in the 1930s and 1940s. Sylvester Nichols noted that the team only wore the "Clowns" script on their uniforms for the first year. Williams changed the uniforms the next season because he disliked the way the word looked on the jerseys.

³⁷⁰. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols." For more information and images about Virgin Street Park see also Appendices A.6 – A.10.

present day U.S. Highway 75.³⁷¹ A 1964 aerial photograph clearly shows that Virgin Street Park comprised of a grandstand on the north side of the field and a lone bleacher southwest of the grandstand on the first base side (See Appendix A.11).³⁷² Architectural and geographical historian Paul Uttinger's topographical map collection reveals that the field also incorporated functional dugouts.³⁷³

For the first time in Tulsa history, and likely the whole state, without the help of white investment Williams established the first black-built, black-owned, and black-operated baseball club and ballpark.³⁷⁴ Granted, many black towns had ball teams and baseball fields, but Williams set a hard-to-follow precedent. The Clowns owner singlehandedly provided his community a meeting place for entertainment and relaxation. Williams' endeavor illustrates why the cultural history of this location is pertinent: Virgin Street Park was the only baseball park in the city of Tulsa's history to be owned and operated exclusively by an African American. Both Association Park and McNulty Park were white-owned and white-run, thereby putting black money into the pockets of the white owners when Negro League teams used their facilities. What Williams did was unorthodox, especially in a Jim Crow society. Before Williams came along many black ball teams had to submit to the demands of a white owner if they wanted to play.

³⁷¹. Tulsa County Clerk Office: Land Records, "Virgin Street Park land records," (1918-1973).

³⁷². "1964 Aerial Map Tulsa."

³⁷³. "Paul Uttinger Map Collection," (2014); "1964 Aerial Map Tulsa." Note: Architectural historian Paul Uttinger greatly contributed to this study by sharing his collection of aerial and topographical maps of Tulsa throughout the twentieth century.

³⁷⁴. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."

The T-Town Clowns never transitioned from semipro to the professional Negro Leagues, but not for the lack of effort. Unfortunately, Williams, the Clowns, and Virgin Street Park appeared at the end of an era. Sylvester Nichols recalls that Alphonso Williams sought to join the ailing Negro League in the late 1940s but he never received an affirmation or membership.³⁷⁵ The main reasons the team remained semiprofessional was twofold: the Negro League pros never admitted his club into the organization. Equally important, the same year the Clowns organized, a young All-American black athlete by the name of Jack Roosevelt Robinson from Pasadena, California entered the Brooklyn Dodgers minor league system set to integrate all of baseball. Coinciding with time of the Clowns existence, the entire country saw Jackie Robinson cross the color barrier in professional baseball in 1947, which set the timer for all professional baseball to integrate. The Clowns played baseball at the semiprofessional level from 1946 to around 1952 before transitioning into a recreational baseball team from the mid 1950s into the early 1960s.³⁷⁶ After integration, the Clowns continued to play into the 1960s—

^{375.} Ibid. Note: To date, very little evidence exists about how much money Alphonso Williams made or lost on the baseball business. Sylvester Nichols remembered vividly even in his 90s that Williams “took good care of us” and never balked at paying them for their service.

^{376.} Note: In many circles the term “semiprofessional” often receives little praise among professional Negro League aficionados. Many teams playing under the umbrella of semiprofessional baseball played as hard as the pros and exhibited outstanding glove work and hitting. Teams like the Clowns played four or five nights a week, traveled in bumpy cars or buses, and held down a regular job. Many Saturday and Sunday games were doubleheaders, some games starting as late as 8 p.m., just to pack up and travel home and start work early the next day.

even sparring against Satchel Paige in Altamont, Kansas in 1962.³⁷⁷ But by 1965, the gig stopped.

Despite Alphonso Williams' team never switching to a full-time professional status, his feat to build, own, and operate a black baseball park is noteworthy. According to *Green Cathedrals*, Philip Lowry's book covering over four hundred notable baseball parks in the United States, Canada, and Caribbean countries, Williams was in rare company.³⁷⁸ There were only three other black men who built and managed a ballpark specifically dedicated to the Negro League pastime. Owner Tom Wilson constructed Wilson Park for his Nashville Elite Giants in the 1930s.³⁷⁹ Alejandro "Alex" Pompez provided Dyckman Oval Baseball Park for the Cuban Stars of New York. Named for the nearby Dyckman neighborhood, Pompez installed lights at Dyckman Park in 1930, making the ballpark only the "second major league field in the New York area" to have night games.³⁸⁰ Pompez fell into legal woes in the mid 1930s and eventually lost his land lease, which led to the demolition of Dyckman Park.³⁸¹ The last known black-built, black-operated ballpark prior to Alphonso Williams' venture was Gus Greenlee Field

³⁷⁷. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."; Charles Smith and Bonnie Smith. Interviewed by W. Jacob Cornwell. Interview with Charles and Bonnie Smith. October 20.

³⁷⁸. Lowry, *Green Cathedrals: The Ultimate Celebration of Major League and Negro League Ballparks*.

³⁷⁹. *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁸⁰. Philip J. Lowry, *Green Cathedrals: The Ultimate Celebration of Major League and Negro League Ballparks*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Walker & Co, 2006), 158.

³⁸¹. *Ibid.*, 158.

constructed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania by Augustus “Gus” Greenlee and opened on April 29, 1932.³⁸² Greenlee encountered racially based corruption charges in 1938, which led to the demise of his reign as a baseball owner.³⁸³ Although these three examples highlight the successes and setbacks of black-owned professional Negro League baseball parks, Wilson, Pompey, and Green shared much in common with Alphonso Williams. Williams furnished a sustainable black baseball business in Tulsa in the 1940s and 1950s until integration crept into Green Country minor league baseball. Like Pompey and Greenlee, Alphonso Williams also experienced legal troubles, which led to the end of Virgin Street Park’s successful era. Many Tulsans suspect that his troubles that were also racially motivated because he was a successful black man in Tulsa with many businesses.³⁸⁴

Several people who knew Alphonso Williams recall how tax problems sent him to jail in the 1960s.³⁸⁵ Exacerbating his growing legal troubles, the United States Marshall’s Office instituted a Marshall Deed and seized Williams’ land in 1968, which included

³⁸². Ibid., 190.

³⁸³. Ibid. Both Nichols and Pearson played for Williams’ Clowns in some capacity from the mid 1940s up to the late 1950s, and they both had respect for Alphonso’s business knack. Although they both admit that he made money in “all kinds of ways,” some perhaps illicit, they both believe authorities fabricated Williams’ tax evasion charges as a measure to bust him for his business acumen.

³⁸⁴. Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."; Pearson, "Interview with Robert "Bob" Pearson."

³⁸⁵. Goodwin, "Interview with Ed Goodwin, Jr."; Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."; Owens, "Interview with Ted Owens."; Pearson, "Interview with Robert "Bob" Pearson."

Virgin Street Park. While Williams served time, several transactions occurred to the property between 1968 and 1973.³⁸⁶ In the early 1970s, Alphonso Williams shortly regained control of the area when he became Power of Attorney and Attorney-in-Fact for owner Burnett Love. Williams then sold the property to the City of Tulsa in 1973.³⁸⁷ Presently, the City still owns the land.³⁸⁸

Once the City of Tulsa gained ownership of the property, complicated by a Highway 75 four-lane expansion, Virgin Street Park lucklessly inherited an expiration date. Virgin Street Park lost much of its relevance after blacks finally integrated into the minor leagues systems in Oklahoma. Present day Google Maps satellite images compared to aerial photographs of Virgin Street Park that precede the widening of Highway 75 indicate a large portion of southbound road easements sacrificed a large area that used to be leftfield and centerfield (See Appendices A.11-A13).³⁸⁹ Eventually the City tore down the ballpark and the former tavern and nightclub building, but as late as 1994, the general store/gas station building remained.³⁹⁰ Today, only a barren field ends in a Virgin Street cul-de-sac.³⁹¹

³⁸⁶. Tulsa County Clerk Office: Land Records, "Virgin Street Park land records."

³⁸⁷. Ibid.; Tulsa Tax Assessor Office, "Virgin Street Park," ed. Property Search (2014).

³⁸⁸. Tulsa Tax Assessor Office, "Virgin Street Park."

³⁸⁹. "Paul Uttinger Map Collection."; "1964 Aerial Map Tulsa."; "Satellite Image of Virgin Street Park," (Google Maps, 2014).

³⁹⁰. Tulsa Tax Assessor Office, "Virgin Street Park."

³⁹¹. "Satellite Image of Virgin Street Park."

By the early 1950s, after seven years of “progress” since Jackie Robinson crossed the color line, blacks finally began to permeate Organized Baseball in Tulsa. Washington, Indiana native Charles “Chuck” Harmon became the first African American to join the Tulsa Oilers at Texas League Park in 1953, later accompanied by his dark-skinned Puerto Rican teammate Nino Escalera.³⁹² A year later, the trend continued when Tulsa added Frank Robinson and Jeff Williams, thereby successfully establishing the team as an integrated ballclub.³⁹³ As blacks started climbing the minor league ranks, Negro League teams like the T-Town Clowns quickly started feeling the terminal effects of baseball’s new (r)evolution. As greater equality for all players started to grow, black baseball business became collateral damage. The Clowns, sucked into the undertow of the waves of change, inevitably followed the same path as the Colts, Black Oilers, and various other black teams in Oklahoma when they too disappeared into part of the cultural memory.

The last ballpark where Negro Leaguers once played in Tulsa was Texas League Park, which later changed names to Oilers Park in the 1960s and to Driller Park in the late 1970s.³⁹⁴ Years after Tulsa effectively desegregating teams and the stadium, Drillers Park tragically grabbed Tulsa’s full attention on April 3rd day when a section of

³⁹². "Harmon Will Play in Oilers' Opener, Schultz."; Brent Kelley, *Voices from the Negro Leagues: Conversations with 52 Baseball Standouts of the Period 1924-1960* (MacFarland & Company, Inc., 1998), 225.

³⁹³. "Tulsa Ball Club Gets New Player."

³⁹⁴. Wayne McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Wayne McCombs, 1990), 462.

bleachers collapsed in 1977.³⁹⁵ The catastrophe accelerated the Drillers' obligation to raze the structure and build a new home. Co-owner Roy Clark lamented, "The only thing holding the park together was the paint. We'd pull a [bleacher] board off and it was all rotten on the inside."³⁹⁶ By 1980, the forty-six year old stadium that had hosted the Tulsa Oilers, countless barnstorming Negro League teams, occasional local black ballclubs, and the Tulsa Drillers inevitably became another statistic.³⁹⁷ When bulldozers and backhoes surgically removed the stadium from the grounds, they left an invisible scar. A move that provided the Tulsa County Fairgrounds with additional spots in their surplus of parking lots, all that remains today are grassy patches and plains of asphalt.

* * *

With the history of Tulsa ballparks intact, where do historic preservationists, cultural historians, and geographers go from here? Beyond the mundane rigors of combing through the necessary microfilm rolls or searching seemingly-endless online databases for maps or aerial photos, what is next? A new and valuable option can be to embrace technology that enables users to manipulate software to reveal results not previously attained. Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) offers an innovative way to discover pertinent information beneath the surface at historical sites. Currently many

³⁹⁵. McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 280; Roy Clark. Interviewed by W. Jacob Cornwell. Interview with Roy Clark. October 17.

³⁹⁶. Clark, "Interview with Roy Clark."

³⁹⁷. McCombs, *Let's Gooooooooooooo Tulsa!: The History of Professional Baseball in Tulsa, Oklahoma*, 268.

cities around the country use GPR to find various subterranean objects to prevent damage, to locate pipes or cables in a nondestructive manner, and to possibly save lives by tracing gas leaks or voids underground. GPR can also be utilized for historical purposes. For each of the ballparks mentioned in this study, GPR has the ability to view what lies beneath the surface at historical ballparks sites. Mimicking a “cyber archeological dig” or a large scale “metal detector,” utilizing the present nondestructive technology enables the user the possibility to search for ballpark remains.

Ground Penetrating Radar also has the ability to solve present-day mysteries like: “Did stadium debris remain at the site after razing or go offsite?” Another likely question surrounding historic sites: “What materials did builders use during construction?” can possibly be answered without ever physically disturbing the surface. GPR is unique in that it can “penetrate” grass, dirt, and sporadic rocks, and would be a suitable form for testing beneath the complex Alphonso Williams used to own (See Appendix A.13). The radar also “penetrates” concrete and asphalt, which could work in the parking lot areas of Association Park and McNulty Park where vast slabs of pavement currently reside (See Appendix A.8).³⁹⁸ An aside to the ballpark quandary, but relevant to this new form of radar, GPR could also possibly find unmarked graves from the Tulsa Race Riot. As of now radar devices cost thousands of dollars and require extensive training to operate, but the successes of Ground Penetrating Radar will only further spread the availability and

³⁹⁸. For more information about the use plot of land after McNulty Park left see also Appendices A.7 through A.10.

likely lower the prices for easier access in the future. All of this can greatly help historians and geographers garner a better understanding of the area they research.³⁹⁹

In the absence of tangible structures, the cultural importance of Tulsa ballpark sites cannot be understated. Each site must be remembered for its contribution to Tulsa's sport and race history, for the good and the bad. Although racial animosity ran rampant in Oklahoma during the Negro League era, these places of sport exhibition allowed a few athletes of color the opportunity to transcend racial barriers where they battled Jim Crow on the ballfield. In unique ways the Tulsa Colts, Tulsa Black Oilers, and T-Town Clowns all sidestepped racial exclusion. The Colts and Black Oilers found successes in contradiction at Association and McNulty parks. Playing in segregated ballparks, athleticism and exhibition allowed them the ability to loosen ties of prejudice. The Clowns served a special role in Tulsa Negro League history because they existed before, during, and after integration spread throughout Oklahoma minor league baseball. During that time and without the help of white investment, Alphonso Williams built a place where the Clowns showcased their professional talents that earned them a revered reputation throughout the region.

When Sylvester Nichols walked the abandoned field on Virgin Street, he pointed to the proximity where each business used to be and spoke fondly of each place.

Illustrating Truman Hartshorn's "insider versus outsider" theory, locals like Nichols and

³⁹⁹. Thomas Rockaway and Joshua A. Rivard, "Application of Ground Penetrating Radar in the Urban Environment," *Dept. of Civil and Environmental Engineering Center for Infrastructure Research*, (2009); Lawrence B. Conyers, "Innovative Ground-penetrating Radar Methods for Archaeological Mapping," *Archaeological Prospection* 13, (2006).

other old timers from the neighborhood who remember the old ballpark, the Eagle Bar, and the Rose Room remember when they were *their* places to be.⁴⁰⁰ They cherish their memories and hold the area in warm regard. For them, the area set a high watermark when Alphonso Williams successfully managed several businesses and provided multiple entertainment venues for the good people of North Tulsa. Despite Williams going to jail for tax evasion in the 1960s, residents remember him as a good man whose commercial ventures served the community in which he lived. His Virgin Street Park showcased high caliber baseball for a segregated people. The Eagle Bar quenched patrons' thirsts. The Rose Room satiated the nightlife needs of North Tulsans, a place where they might have met their husband or wife, or had the pleasure to see Ike and Tina Turner, Della Reese, or Nat King's brother Ike Cole, on their separate roads through show business.⁴⁰¹ This special area figuratively and literally filled people's spirits. When "outsiders" tour this area today, they often focus on aged houses, boarded-up buildings, or used cars and tire shops surrounded by industrial businesses without noticing well-manicured lawns and freshly painted homes. For locals, they embrace their innate "insiders territoriality" in communal neighborhoods, in their school spirit, and at their favorite parks or restaurants.⁴⁰²

So what is the historical and cultural importance to the baseball parks in Tulsa? Black baseball grew in popularity in the mid 1920s, lulled in the 1930s during the Great

^{400.} Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."; Hartshorn et al., *Interpreting the City: An Urban Geography*.

^{401.} Nichols, "Interviews with Sylvester Nichols."

^{402.} Hartshorn et al., *Interpreting the City: An Urban Geography*.

Depression, rebounded in the 1940s after World War II, and faded into obscurity by the mid 1950s. Using various historic preservation research methods, this study reveals the importance of Tulsa Negro League teams' involvements in Tulsa and baseball history at large, the parks where they once played, and what has been lost. Although every park mentioned no longer exists, the ballpark sites can open a dialogue for discussion about the larger story beyond the realm of sports. The buildings matter very little in the grand scheme of history. The sites represent how race, money, and emotion collectively define what the places mean to individuals. Having a structure allows for a larger perspective, but the events that happened *inside* the ballpark are what contribute to the historic significance of an area. These places either encouraged or impeded racial relations—sometimes in the same season.

The ballparks in this research reveal that a whole new area of Tulsa history has yet to be discovered. Researchers will find out how Tulsa suffered from a racial split personality. Association Park's location now houses a couple of warehouse buildings and a parking lot, not far from where today's AA Tulsa Drillers baseball club plays at ONEOK Field. The only indicator of the ballpark's convoluted history lingers in old newspaper articles. A group of white Tulsans effectively segregated the baseball grounds, yet the 1915 Tulsa Colts winning season on the same field illustrates the city's Jim Crow schizophrenia.

Similarly, McNulty Park's role in race relations needs examination. The 10th and Elgin location sequestered people during the race riot, but hosted black baseball for an entire decade. Over the next sixty years, the lot would ebb and flow with the rest of the downtown landscape (See Appendices A.7-A.10). The deco building survived the era of

urban renewal, and in the 1990s developers purchased the property to build a downtown-located home improvement warehouse (See Appendices A.9 and A.10).⁴⁰³ Aside from the restricted access to framed 1930 newspaper ads tucked inconspicuously inside the foyer entrance of the Warehouse Market building that refer to the “Eleventh and Elgin” store as the “Old McNulty Park Location,” very little indicates the site’s rich Jekyll-and-Hyde chaotic history.⁴⁰⁴

An empty field on a dead end street has the potential to disseminate its cultural importance, not for what it is, but for what it was. Alphonso Williams unknowingly joined a small class of Negro League ballpark owners. His team became *North Tulsa’s team*, the T-Town Clowns. With diligence and perseverance, along with the aid of modern technology like social media networking, online databases, and burgeoning technology like Ground Penetrating Radar, much can be derived about the social, racial, and cultural significance of the sites, neighborhoods, and regions in which Negro League baseball occurred. Using cultural geography as a tool for historic preservation, these ballparks have the wonderful possibility to purvey a sense of place.

⁴⁰³. I. Marc Carlson, "McNulty Park," in *The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (2013); Tulsa County Clerk Office: Land Records, "McNulty Park Land Records."

⁴⁰⁴. "Opening Day Specials," *Tulsa Daily World*, September 13, 1930.

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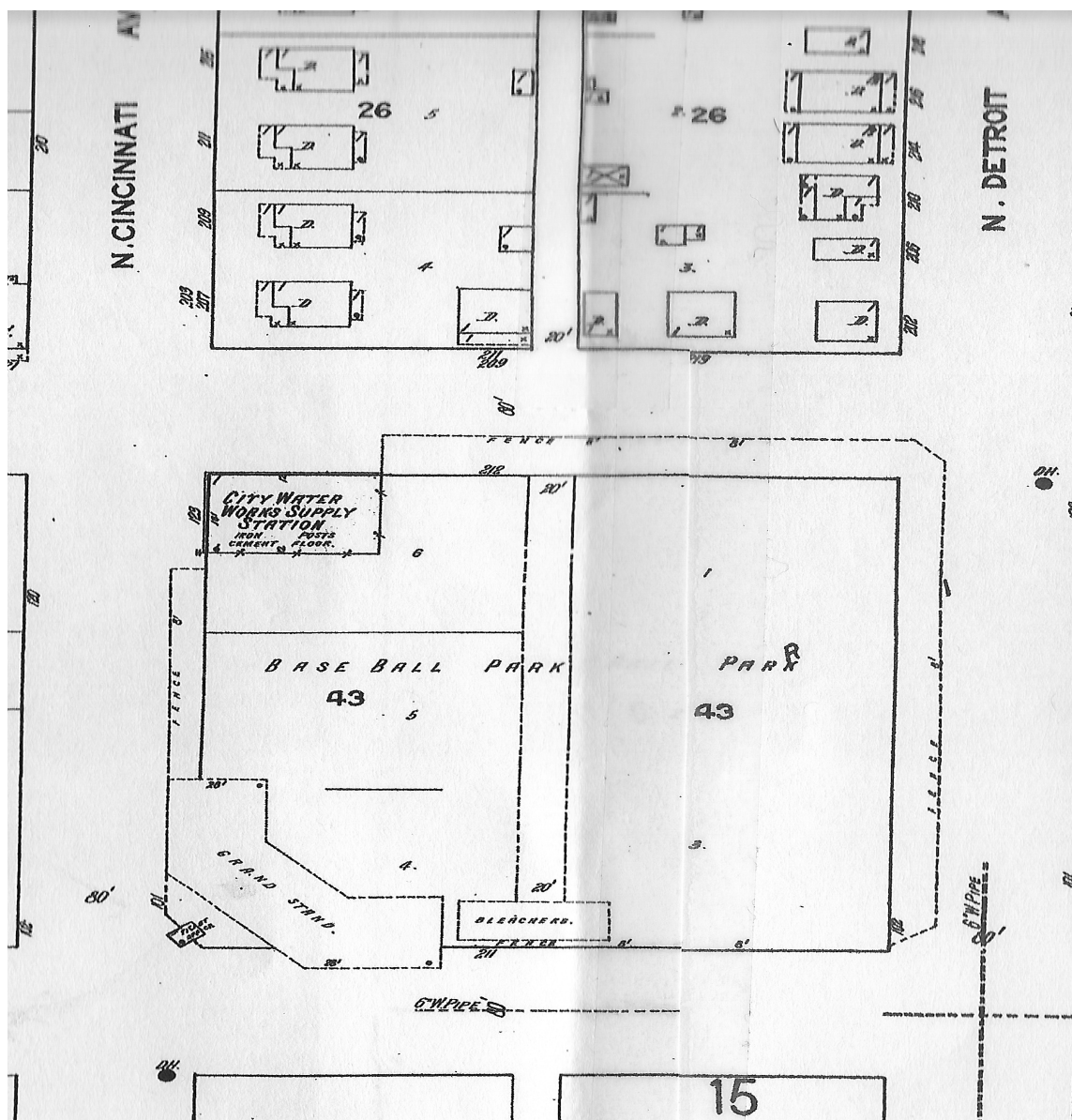
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APPENDICES



Appendix A.0. Photograph of first known baseball game in Oklahoma territory in 1889. Settlers cleared pastures to provide makeshift baseball fields for recreation. Although African Americans appear to be absent from the exhibition, the presence of black towns during the same time period likely paralleled their white counterparts with their own version of pasture ball. Image from Richard Hendricks at the Oklahoma Sports Museum in Guthrie, Oklahoma.



Appendix A.1. 1915 Sanborn Insurance Map, pages 7 and 8 of Association Park. Note the first set of bleachers to the right of the grandstand is the byproduct of Al Brown's hasty decision to satisfy angry white patrons. See also Appendix A.16 image for locations of Tulsa ballparks.
Image from Sanborn Map database at Oklahoma State University.



Appendix A. 2. 1918 Birdseye view of Tulsa where Association Park (center) once stood. Note the completed set of bleachers to the left and right of the grandstands constructed for African Americans' seating. See also Appendix A.16 image for locations of Tulsa ballparks. Image from Oklahoma State University Map Collection.

BLEACHERS TO BE ERECTED AT ONCE

AL BROWN ANNOUNCED YESTER-
DAY THAT BLEACHERS WOULD
BE ERECTED AT ONCE.

Al Brown, president of the Tulsa baseball club, announced this morning that work would start immediately on the construction of bleachers at the Association park.

It is the intention of the club officials to have the work completed by the time the team returns from its present road trip which will be May 21. It will almost be necessary for them to build that a portion of the seats can be set aside for colored people as the public has demanded that something be done with the negroes, who have heretofore occupied seats in the grandstand with the whites.

Appendix A.3. Article published in the Tulsa World on May 27, 1914 calling for separate bleachers for African-American patrons. Image from Gateway database at Oklahoma Historical Society.



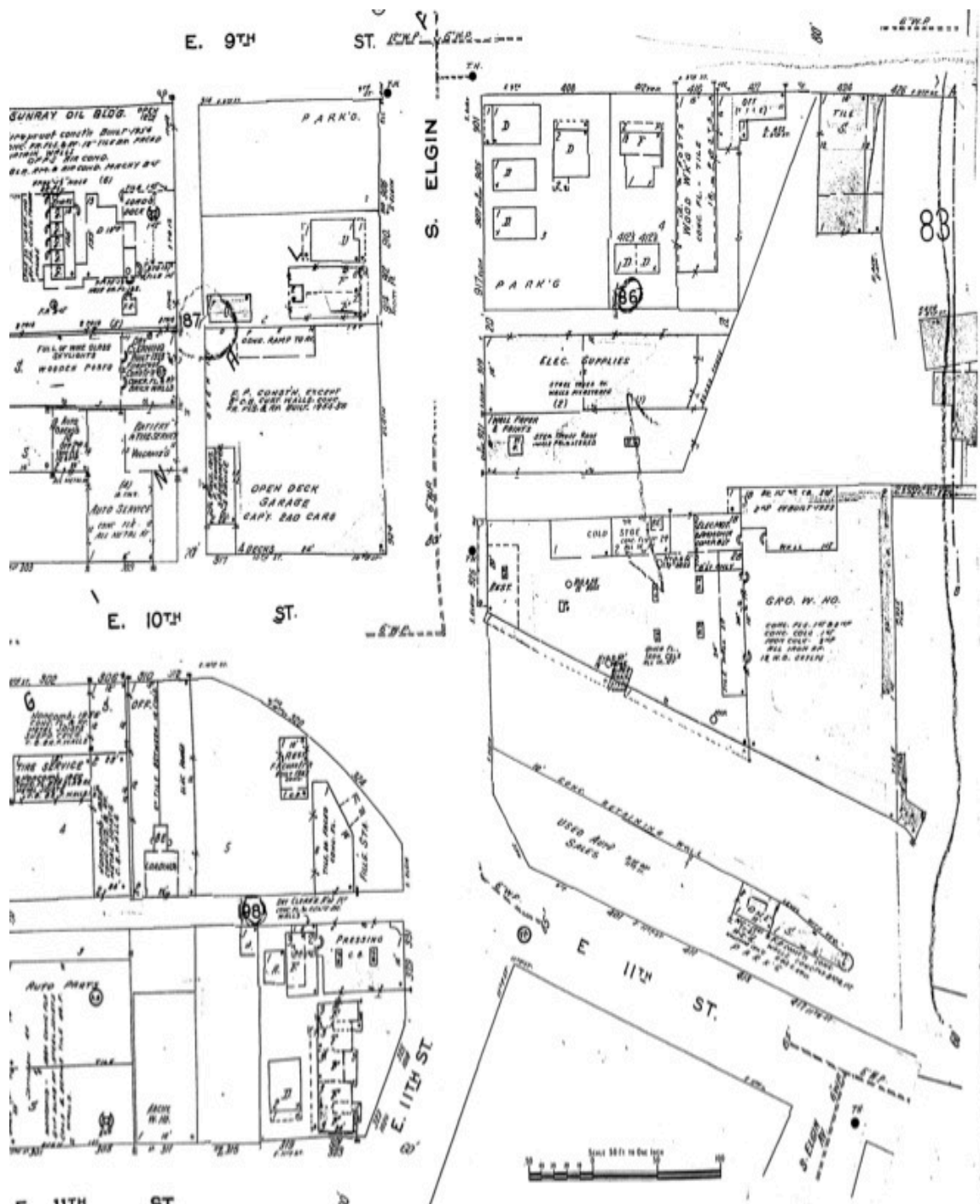
Appendix A.4. Image from Tulsa Race Riot. Note the derogatory reference to Greenwood as “Little Africa.” Image from Oklahoma State University-Tulsa Ruth Sigler Avery Tulsa Race Riot Archive Collection.



Appendix A.5. National Guard troops herding African-American men toward McNulty Park.
Image from Tulsa Historical Society Archives.



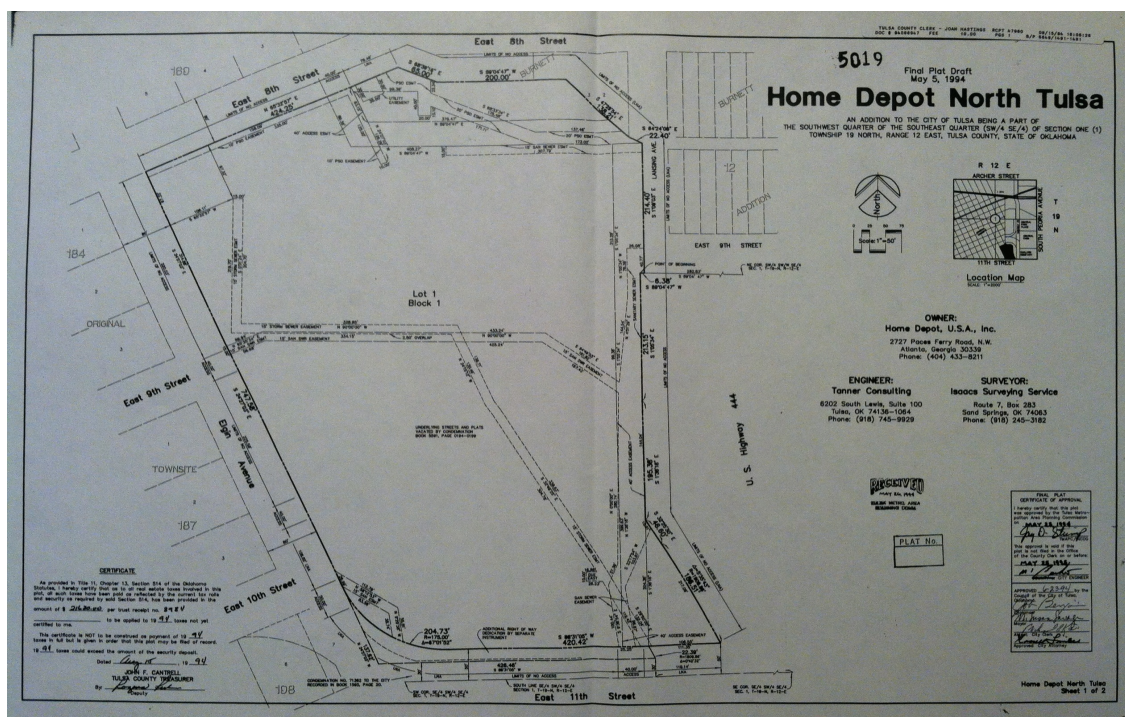
Appendix A.6. McNulty Park during the second day of the race riot when troops moved blacks to the ballpark for safety. Image taken from the *This Land Press* article “Enormity and Image” written by University of Tulsa librarian and archivist I. Marc Carlson. Original image is archived in the University of Tulsa’s Tulsa Race Riot and Greenwood Community Special Collections.
See also Appendix A.16 image for locations of Tulsa ballparks.



Appendix A.7. Sanborn image of McNulty Park area, 1915-1926 (revised 1939), page 32. Although the date from Sanborn's database states the drawing to have been amended in 1926, the structures on the property indicate that last amendment to the map was post-1930 after Harden built the Warehouse Market grocery store. See also Appendix A.16 image for locations of Tulsa ballparks. Image from Sanborn Map database at Oklahoma State University.



Appendix A.8. A 1959 aerial photograph postcard shows the old McNulty Park location (lower center). After developers razed the ballpark in 1930, they built the art deco Warehouse Market building, which still stands today (located at bottom left inside the blue circle). See also Appendix A.16 image for locations of Tulsa ballparks. Image from author's collection.

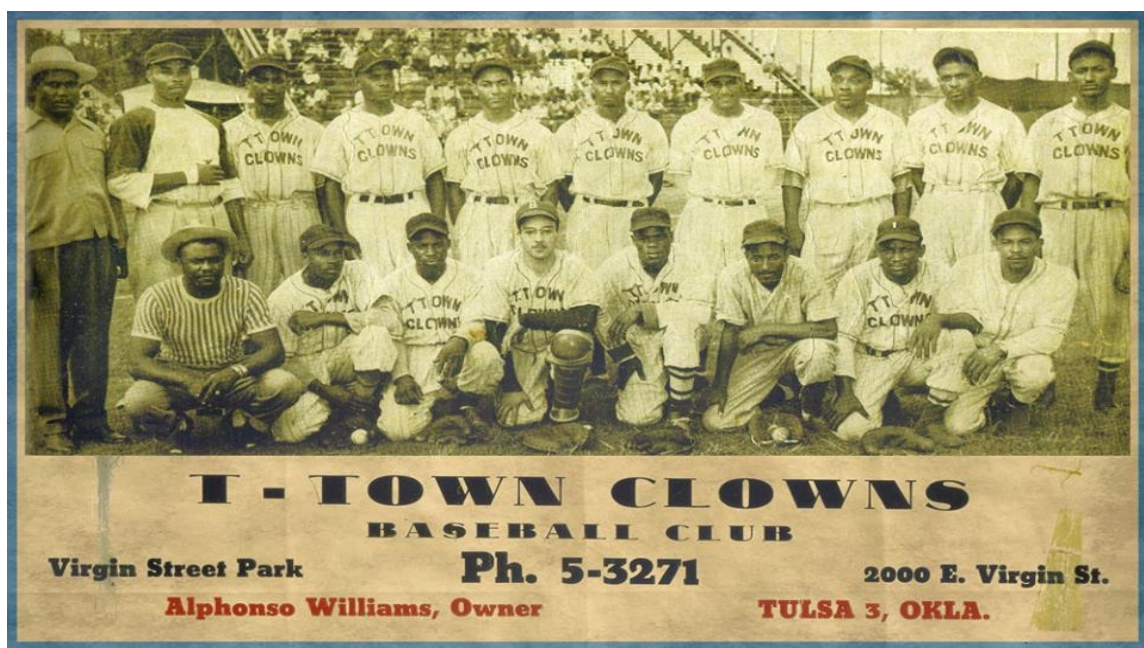


Appendix A.9. Final Plat Draft for Home Depot North Tulsa in 1994. See also Appendix A.16 image for locations of Tulsa ballparks. Image from Tulsa County Clerk Office.

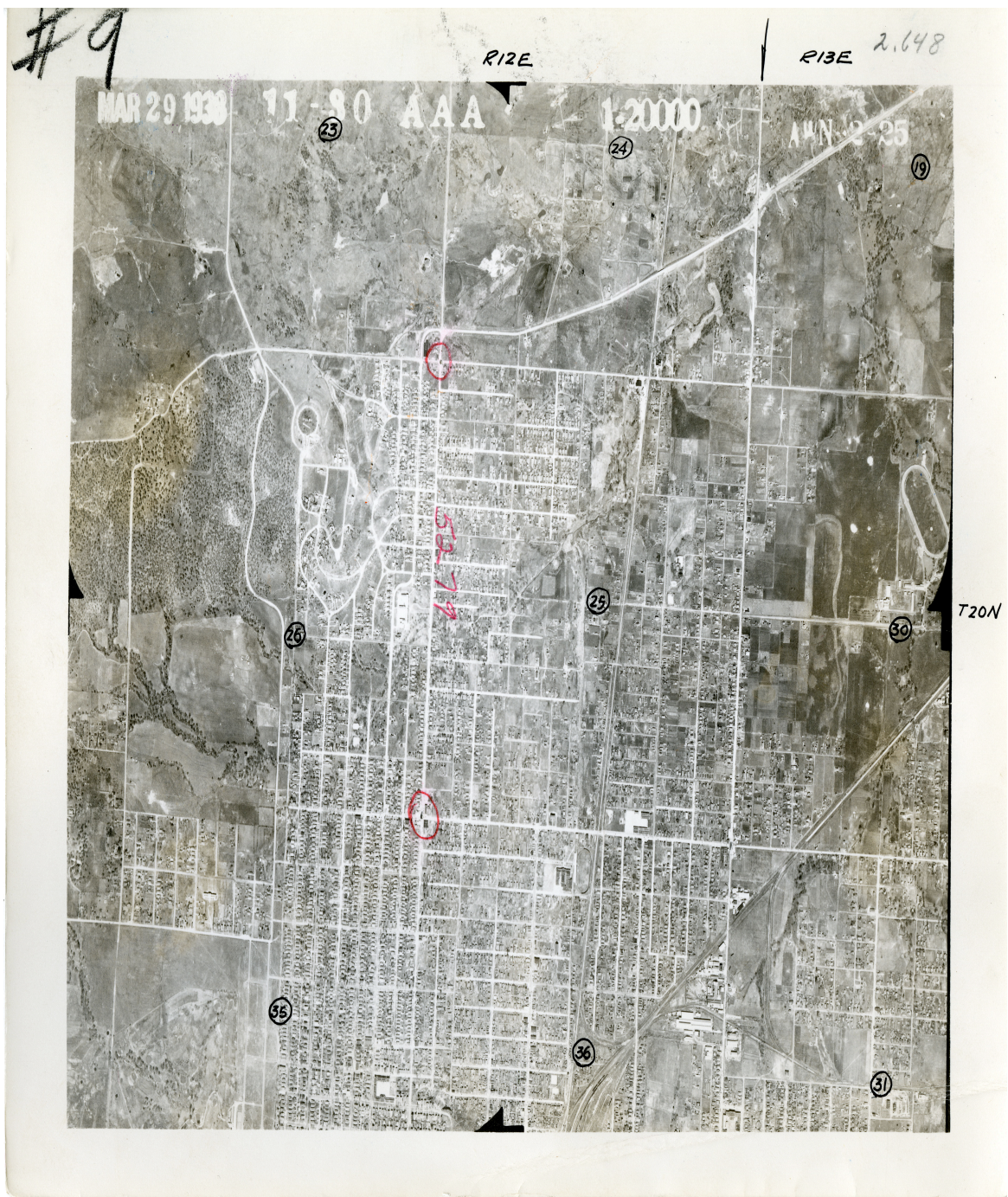


Appendix A.10. This image overlay depicts where McNulty Park once stood over top a present day Google Earth view of the grounds where the old Warehouse Market building and downtown Home Depot sit today. See also Appendix A.16 image for locations of Tulsa ballparks. Image from University of Tulsa librarian and archivist I. Marc Carlson's Tulsa Race Riot blog:

<http://tulsaraceriot.wordpress.com/2013/03/06/mcnulty-park/>.



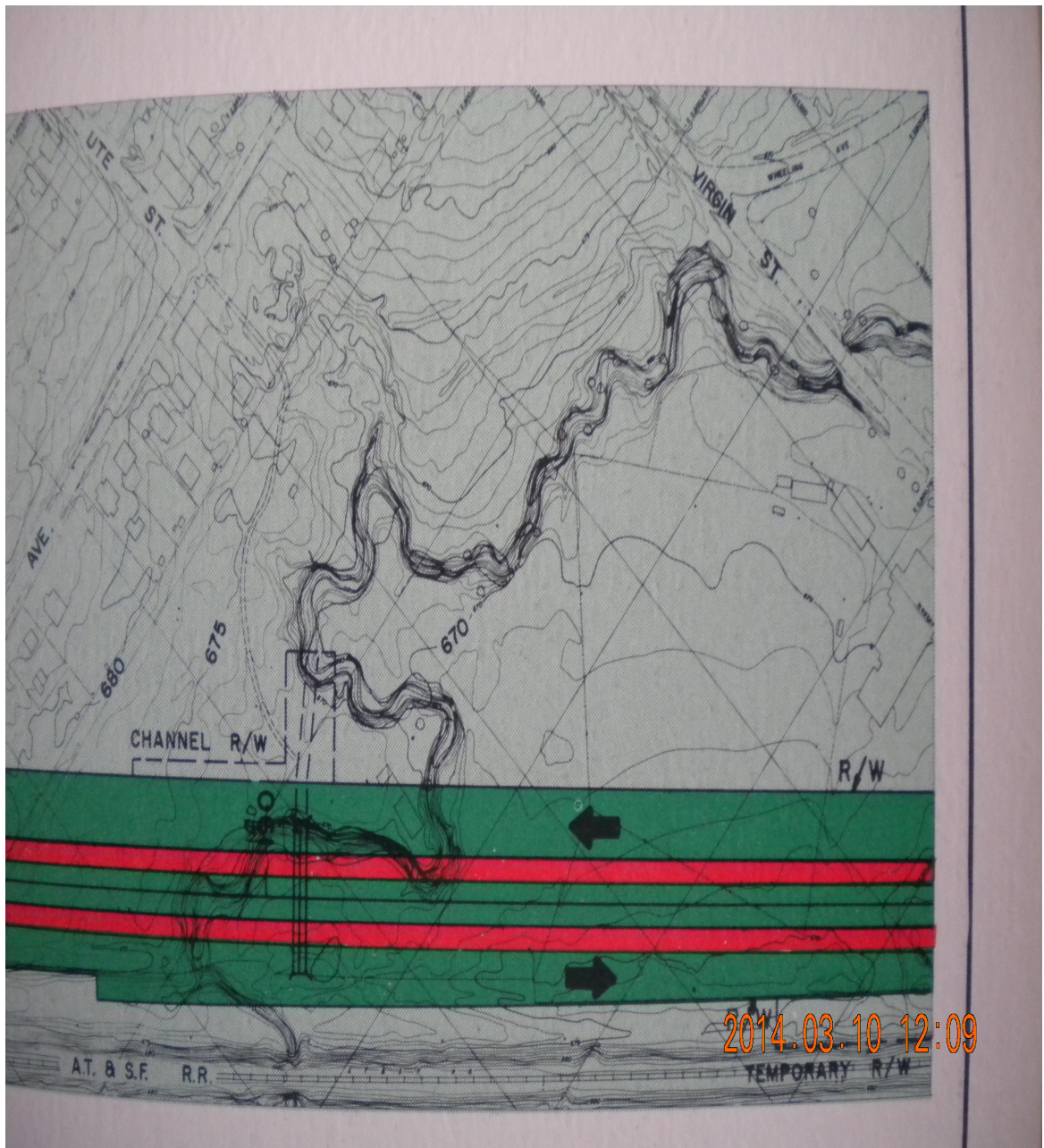
Appendix A.11. Team photograph of the Tulsa T-Town Clowns taken in 1946. Sylvester Nichols sits fourth from the right, next to the man in catching equipment. The bleachers in the background appear to be parallel with Virgin Street. See also Appendix A.16 image for locations of Tulsa ballparks. Image from author's collection.



Appendix A.12. 1938 aerial map of Tulsa that features the site where Virgin Street Park would be built (center right at T20N). Note the neighborhood north of the land has also yet to have houses built there and much of the area remains an open field. See also Appendix A.16 image for locations of Tulsa ballparks. Image from Oklahoma State University Map Collection.

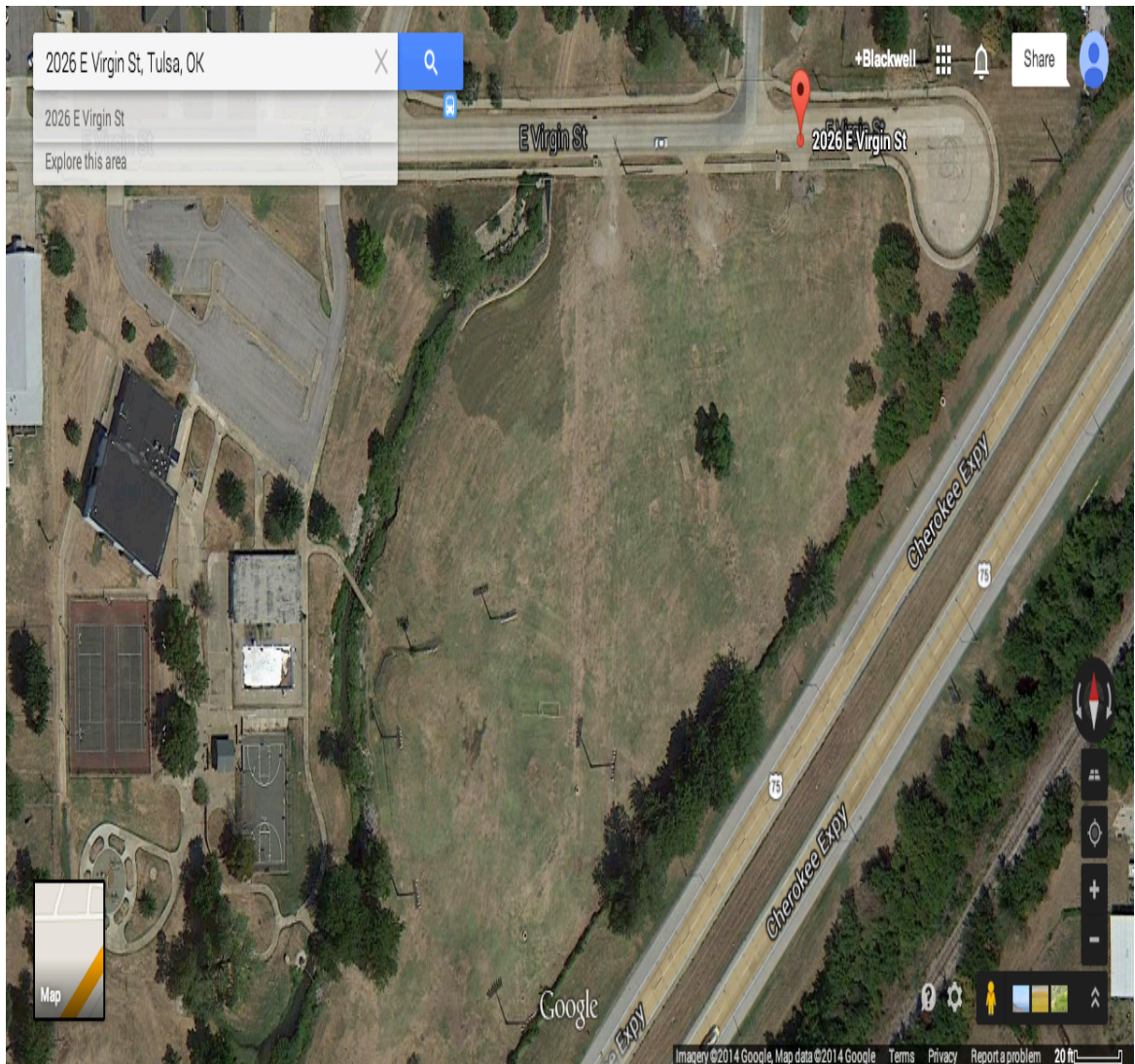


Appendix A.13. This is close up of an aerial shot taken over Virgin Street Park in 1964 near the end of the ballpark's heyday. Note the separate buildings on the property, all owned and managed by black businessman Alphonso Williams. See also Appendix A.16 image for locations of Tulsa ballparks. Image adapted from Oklahoma State University Map Collection, labeled by the author with assistance from Edna Cherry.

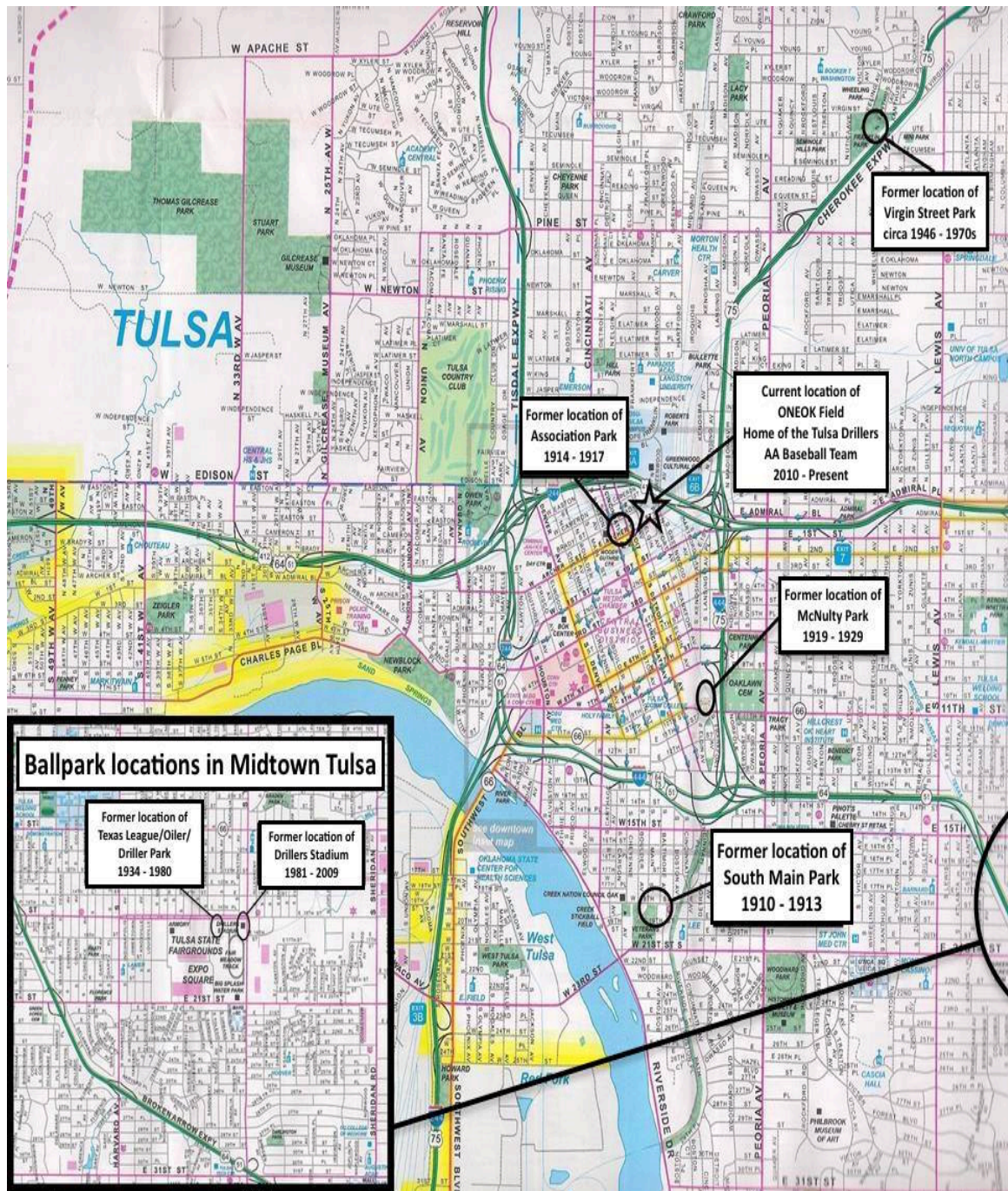


Appendix A.14. Image of proposed highway plans that effectively halted the used of Virgin Street Park in the late 1960s/early 1970s. Virgin Street Park appears as an outline drawing in the lower right. Note at the bottom lower right how both lanes of Highway 75 traffic and easements consume the use of the outfield. See also Appendix A.16 image for locations of Tulsa ballparks.

Image from Paul Uttinger Map Collection.



Appendix A.15. Google Earth image in 2014 of the former site of Virgin Street Park, The Rose Room, Eagle Bar and general store. Note the proximity of the cul-de-sac and Highway 75. Also the light poles in the bottom center of the photo are not part of the old ballpark, but where little leaguers now play. See also Appendix A.16 image for locations of Tulsa ballparks. Image from Google Maps.



Appendix A.16. Image adapted from Target Marketing 2015 Tulsa map and labeled to illustrate locations of various ballparks in the city over the past century. Image from author’s collection.

VITA

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Assisted in planning, locating items, and assembling exhibit “Toy Stories: A Century of Toys” at Tulsa Historical Society in Tulsa, Oklahoma 2014

Assisted in class projects researching, planning, and assembling Old Central exhibit “Where the College Came From” at Sheerar Museum in Stillwater, Oklahoma for Dr. Williams S. Bryan’s Public History and Museum Studies courses 2013-2014

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